



NOBIRU KUSUNOKI
Illustrator ARICO

3

The
Reincarnated Prince
and the
Haloed Sage

The Epic Tale of the Reincarnated Prince Herscherik

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Prologue: The Game, the Scheme, and the White Snow

The seasons of Gracis Kingdom were less extreme compared to its neighbors. The year was divided evenly between the four seasons, and it was neither as hot as the southern reaches of the continent, nor as cold as the northern tundra beyond the mountains. The mild climate had contributed in some manner to the nation's prosperity.

However, this prosperous kingdom had declined in recent years. It was beginning to rot from the inside, poisoned by the corruption of its nobles and government officials. And, as though to reflect its internal strife, the kingdom's climate had begun to worsen. Drought, floods, and widespread infestations became much more frequent throughout the nation, causing famines. Worse yet, those seemingly ubiquitous greedy nobles had raised taxes to line their pockets, further destabilizing the lives of their people.

The citizens of Gracis might have been able to weather either famine or nationwide corruption, but both at once were unbearable. One of them was a man-made catastrophe, to boot. An easily avoidable one at that, if the king had only kept those nobles under control. The people called the king a fool and cursed his reign. If the king had only reined in the nobility and served the country as his duty demanded, their struggles would undeniably be lessened.

On the other hand, most people remained in the country despite their grievances, because they knew full-well that they would be worse off in neighboring nations. Immigrants in foreign lands were nothing but cheap labor. Starting out from scratch in a situation like that would require incredible effort, patience, and luck. Those common folk who worked themselves to the bone day in and day out had no way to improve their circumstances, nor did they have any hope things would improve. It became a daily ritual for workers to find themselves at a local tavern at the end of the day, to drink and complain the night away.

“It’s okay!” the barkeep’s son said cheerfully. He’d been helping tend to the customers with a wooden tray in hand.

“Come on, kid. The grown-ups are talking.”

The hardened regulars frowned at the boy, each holding a full wooden mug of cheap booze in their hand. Most boys his age would have run the other way, terrified. However, irritated drunks were part of life in a tavern.

The boy instead answered with a beaming smile. “Because of the Prince of Light!”

“Prince of Light?” The regular who had first answered the boy recognized the title. Children in town had taken to playing pretend, and playing “Prince of Light” was particularly popular these days. The gist of the story was that the Prince of Light, with his servants in tow, would take down the bad guys and make the world better.

The make-believe game required one child to play the Prince of Light and two more to play his attendants, as well as any villains or princesses they wanted to be involved. At the prince’s command, his men would defeat the villains and save the princess. With the catchphrase ‘Now that settles it!’, the prince would hold up his pocket watch to the villains. This trend seemed to have originated in a recent play performed by a traveling theater troupe, called *How the Prince of Light Restored the World*. Reenacting the play had become all the rage among the children of the capital, and the trend showed no sign of stopping. Even this tavern regular’s daughter would recite parts to him every day.

At the end of the day, however, it was just make-believe for children.

“Hmph. A cheap children’s story...” the regular grumbled.

“The Prince of Light is real!” the son of the barkeep protested, his polite smile fading. “I met him when—”

“Hey! Don’t shout at customers!” A fist struck the boy’s head, cutting his rant short. The tray fell to the floor, but since it had nothing on it, there was no damage save for the loud clatter. “Go to the kitchen and help your daddy,” the boy’s mother ordered.

“But Mom... the Prince of Light is real!”

"Now." At his mother's forceful command, the boy picked up the tray before trudging off to the kitchen. After watching her son leave, the tavern owner's wife gave her customer an apologetic look. "I'm sorry about that."

"He's just a kid..." the man muttered. "Don't go too hard on him for it." The owner's wife had an ample, motherly figure, so once she raised her voice even a hardened drunk like him felt like he'd disappointed his own mother. Both his frustration and buzz had dissipated. Then, the man recalled how the tavern matriarch hadn't been out on the floor lately due to some illness or other. "You feeling all right, Mama?"

"Sorry to make you worry. We finally managed to get some medicine from a traveling merchant. I'm doing much better."

"Good to hear. Speaking of, those bandits lurking on the roads have been taken care of," the man added.

Crime had gotten worse because of the country's unstable rule, leading to an abundance of bandits outside of the capital that targeted the merchants along trade routes. The result was a drastic drop in the number of merchants coming into the city, and those few who braved the journey were forced to hire guards. Moreover, the lords and ladies of the outer territories would charge merchants a fee for their meager 'protection.' The merchants in turn had to charge more money for their goods; some things had even doubled in price since the bandits began to appear. The medicine the tavern owner's wife needed was sorely affected, so she'd been unable to treat her illness for some time.

"I hear they had attacked and killed some people, too... Thank goodness they're gone. But who took them out? I doubt that lord would do anything for his people..." The regular recalled the lord of the land, whom he had seen from a distance once or twice. The man was immensely fat, in contrast to his emaciated populace. The people of the area all held the belief the lord could probably roll faster than he could walk.

"Speaking of His Lordship, there's been a notice that this year's taxes will be lowered," a younger regular interjected.

"Really?!" The first man couldn't help but raise his voice. He couldn't imagine that awful aristocrat lowering taxes by any amount—much less across the

board, for the common folk.

“It’s true. What’s more, the announcement says he’ll even consider accommodations for those who can’t pay. At first, I was afraid he knew some natural disaster was about to strike... But, now that I think about it, there *was* a guest at the lord’s manor shortly before the notice went out...” The young man trailed off before ordering a drink.

The barkeep quickly prepared the man’s order, sharing a smile with his wife. The two regulars were too busy gossiping about their lord over drinks to realize the change in the barkeep and his wife.

“All thanks to the Prince of Light...” their son muttered as he walked by them, carrying a dish from the kitchen. “Why do we have to keep it a secret?”

Elsewhere, there was a dark room without a single window. The only source of light was a lamp placed on the table in the center of the room, illuminating only the hands of those that had gathered there.

“Preparations are complete.”

“Finally!” one of the men cried. The room was filled with relief and excitement at the long-awaited good news.

“Settle down, everyone. Preparations have been made. Nothing more.” Another man’s voice, calm and collected, restored the tensions in the room. “Shall we begin...? Glory to Saint Ferris.”

“Glory to Saint Ferris!” the rest of the room copied.

Meanwhile, there stood a figure clad in a Spellcaster robe staring out into a snowy field. They *hated* snow. The white color always reminded them of their past. Their perfectly straight white hair perhaps suggested why.

Suddenly, a gust of wind lifted some flakes of snow from the ground, and they settled on their long, white locks. “I wish it would all disappear...” This utterance, that seemed to reject everything in the world yet long for something more, was lost in the wintry landscape.

Chapter One: The Prince, the New Year's Party, and the Ambush

The new year had finally arrived in Gracis. The castle in the capital, which had been covered in a thick blanket of white snow, was hosting a party to celebrate the new year, with royalty, nobles, and government officials in attendance. It was a grand ball that included all of their families, too. Every attendee dressed to impress, enjoying small talk and the buffet. The ball also included a dance floor, accompanied by popular tunes performed by the country's top musicians and populated by elegantly dancing guests.

In a corner of the ballroom, a child sat on a chair with his eyes fixed on the bustling party. The boy, who could easily be mistaken for a girl, had soft blond hair, emerald eyes, and fair skin. At a few months shy of seven years old, the child masked his exasperation behind an adorable smile. He continued to watch the party as he half-heartedly interacted with every noble or official who passed, as well as their children. *Please let this end...* he silently groaned for the umpteenth time that evening. Even so, he maintained a perfect smile on the exterior—this was his way of getting by in this world. The boy was Herscherik Gracis, the Seventh and youngest Prince of Gracis Kingdom. People close to him called him Hersch.

In a life very different from his current one, Herscherik had been Ryoko Hayakawa, an ordinary Japanese woman (if a bit of an otaku at heart) who worked at a corporate office. Her life had been cut short in a traffic accident the day before her thirty-fifth birthday. Then, she had found herself reborn into this world of sword and magic as Herscherik—an otaku spinster trapped in the body of a stereotypical blond-haired, green-eyed little prince.

Yet another low-ranking noble had come to greet Herscherik, looking to inch closer to royalty by any measly degree possible. After completing the exchange with his signature customer-service smile, the prince silently groaned.

Ryoko's workplace had been a relatively friendly environment, and she often

used to go out for drinks with her coworkers. They would hit the bars for all kinds of occasions, from end-of-year parties to celebrating a new hire. Her bosses liked to have their drinks poured for them, as many people did in modern Japan, and tradition dictated that those lower on the totem pole would go around the table doing just that. While the relatively new employees were always stiff and nervous while interacting with the execs, the higher-ups always acted completely casual.

“Something wrong, Hersch?” A young man who had been standing by the prince spoke quietly, looking into his eyes. He had curly hair, the gold-tinted orange of a sunset, that fell to slightly below his shoulders. While he usually kept his hair haphazardly tied back, he’d styled it neatly just for the occasion. He had an attractive face with downturned, sapphire-colored eyes that gave him an air of gentleness. This young man was Octavian Aldis, the third son of the Marquis Roland Aldis (who was once feared by neighboring nations as the Blazing General) and knight of service to Herscherik. The prince addressed him as Oránge, or Oran for short.

“No, Oran. Just remembered something funny.”

“All right... But let me know if you see anything.” Oran straightened his back and returned to carefully watching the ballroom. He was currently dressed in a white formal uniform that denoted his knightly service to Herscherik; at his side hung an undecorated sword, which stood in sharp contrast to the extravagance on display at the ball. This blade, which he had used every day of his life for years, also signified that he was one of the only people allowed to bring a weapon into this party outside of the official guards. It was proof that he had sworn an oath of loyalty to his master, allowing him to put the orders of the young prince above even those of the king himself.

“I know, I know. But, Oran... wouldn’t you agree that I’ve greeted basically everyone who wanted to see me?” Herscherik said, looking around the room to find a few nobles and officials observing him. He met a few of their eyes, but they all hurriedly turned away once Herscherik gave them a single smile.

“I’d say so.” Oran gave another look around the area. Anyone who met his eyes similarly looked away. Herscherik was starting to feel the results of his labor over the past year and a half.

“I’m back,” a voice came from behind Herscherik.

“Welcome, Kuro. Thank you.” Most people would have been startled by such a figure appearing soundlessly behind them and speaking so suddenly. The prince and his knight, however, did not bat an eye nor turn around, but simply greeted Schwarz, Herscherik’s butler of service. The young man, whom Herscherik had nicknamed Kuro, had silky black hair and ruby eyes, with a toned physique and a shadowy air about him. While Kuro dressed in all-black formalwear becoming of his position, Herscherik assumed that there were several weapons hidden beneath Kuro’s innocuous outfit. As one of the most capable spies in the country, equipping weapons was as routine for him as buttoning his shirt. Kuro had a mysterious air about him that had garnered much popularity among the ladies, just as Oran’s gentlemanly demeanor had.

“You’re late, Black Dog. Where’ve you been?”

“Keep your mouth shut, Knight Delinquent. Has all that muscle finally crowded out your brain?”

Herscherik chuckled as the two bickered without changing their expressions. A back and forth of this caliber was a daily occurrence between them. Herscherik had grown accustomed to their unique method of communication. While anyone unfamiliar with their dynamic might have assumed that they were angry, Herscherik could see how they acknowledged each other’s strength and trusted one another—not that they would be caught dead saying that out loud.

“How is it, Kuro?” Herscherik interrupted, seeing that they would otherwise keep barking at each other for eternity.

“They’re all keeping their word. I double-checked.”

“Wonderful.” Herscherik smiled, as if he had just spotted some of his favorite treats. Anyone not used to his implications saw nothing but an innocent smile becoming of his age, but those who understood the subtext saw malicious glee. “As long as they keep their word, I won’t be forced to do something I won’t like,” Herscherik added, with a touch of theatrics.

Then, Herscherik thought back on the events that had taken place eighteen months ago. After the incident at the orphanage, little else had happened. It

had been so quiet Herscherik was starting to become suspicious. He'd had no contact with anyone under the minister's thumb, nor seen any sign of the agents of the Church that had most likely been involved in drug trafficking. *Calm before the storm... It has to be*, Herscherik thought.

After a month of nothing, Herscherik had finally decided to make the first move. "Fortune favors the bold. Sorry, guys. We're in this together now," he'd declared to his men of service. With them in tow, Herscherik had traveled east and west across the city to lend a helping hand to people in need or take down an evil-doing noble with a smile on his face and evidence in hand. At some point, they'd rescued a traveling troupe from bandits and dismantled an underground organization that preyed on the common folk. Using Count Ruseria's silver pocket watch like the magistrate Mito Komon had used his famous seal in that TV drama Ryoko used to watch before her death, Herscherik had embarked on a journey to fix this world from the ground up, running every which way with his henchmen in tow, and asking his oldest brother and House Aldis to back them up when needed.

"If they don't want to come out to play, I'll start fires until they come out to put them out."

Herscherik would crack a devilish grin as he delivered lines like this. His men of service couldn't pick their jaws up from the floor at the contrast between Herscherik's ruthless tone and his heroic actions. Herscherik had continued to tell them "We punish the bad guys, help some good people... It's a win-win. And if it takes any heat off of Mark's back..."

After their drug bust, First Prince Marx had to clean up the brunt of the mess. Marx knew full well the danger he was in, but chose to take on the role since his status would make him a less attractive target than Herscherik. Herscherik wasn't happy with less than absolute safety for his brother, so he had decided to go out into the frontlines to divide the threat between the two of them.

Marx had later scolded Herscherik for it, but Herscherik had argued directly with his brother. "You're important to me too, Mark. What good is a patron if they feel too threatened to protect you? Besides, your duties don't allow you to get around much." With that, Marx reluctantly agreed—with the condition that Herscherik would never overreach his limits.

At the end of it all, Herscherik spent his busy days by playing the sweet little prince by day and righting wrongs in the world by night. He went around blackmailing nobles with each newly uncovered piece of evidence, forcing them to do honest work and keep quiet about his involvement. He made sure that anyone he helped never mentioned his name, either. His nemesis would surely notice Herscherik's actions. They might even make a move—or at least, Herscherik hoped they would. That was Herscherik's "fortune favors the bold" strategy. Of course, boldness came with its fair share of danger.

Today, this fancy ball attended by almost every noble and official in the land was the perfect opportunity for Herscherik, and a nightmare for the corrupt nobility. Herscherik had ensured that all his blackmail schemes were still in effect, and even just the act of sending someone to confirm this reinforced that Herscherik still had the upper hand. For those on the receiving end, there was no other way to put it. All Herscherik had to do was ask "How are you today?" to each terrified noble, complete with the customer-service smile Ryoko had spent half of her life perfecting, and they would buckle to the pressure without another word. Since some didn't even dare approach him, he had Kuro check up on them. The butler had performed his task admirably, easily weaving through the crowded ballroom. Herscherik was sure that Kuro had subtly pressured them even further.

The little prince looked up at the two men standing behind him. They had executed Operation Fortune Favors the Bold perfectly. *Seriously*, Herscherik thought, *they're both too good to me*. Even as Herscherik found the two reliable, he couldn't help but let out a secret sigh of disappointment in himself. Kuro was an incredible spy who'd earned the moniker of Shadow Fang, and he was the best investigator out there, not to mention a deadly fighter in his own right. Oran was unparalleled when it came to the art of combat, skilled in the lance and horseback riding as well as the sword.

By contrast, their master Herscherik was utterly ordinary. In fact, he was *less* than that. He had somehow missed out on all of the typical isekai protagonist perks. Less-than-average athletic ability, not a shred of combat sense, and no magic to speak of. Without any other special abilities of note, all he had was his title as the Seventh Prince, his previous life experience, and perhaps his

adorable appearance—although even that paled in comparison to his siblings.

“Hersch? Are you not feeling well?” Kuro said, concern creeping into his voice as Herscherik fell quiet.

The prince snapped out of it and shook his head. “No, I’m fine. We did what we came here to do, and it’s getting late. Let’s get back to the Outer Quarters.” He took out his pocket watch and opened it to find that it was already past eight in the evening. He would have bailed back to his room after an hour or so, using his young age as an excuse, if they didn’t have to blackma— or rather, *greet* some people. “It’s past my bedtime.” He shrugged melodramatically, nearly making his men of service burst out laughing. They both knew that Herscherik was nowhere near as powerless as he looked, and that the prince was planning to use that fact to his advantage for a while longer. “Kuro, can you let Mister Rook know, please? Father will be worried if I leave without saying anything.” Herscherik saw Kuro acknowledge his request and climbed out of his chair.

Then, a figure approached them.

“Prince Herscherik, I presume.” A man of average height and girth stepped towards them, the top of his bald head shining in the lamplight. He looked like the quintessential noble.

Herscherik gazed at the man. *I think I recognize him...* He had seen this man before, and Herscherik did have a relatively good memory. *I know I’ve seen him before. It’s right on the tip of my tongue.* Moreover, Herscherik sensed no animosity from the noble. He was most often met with slimy, ingratiating gazes from people who were looking to take advantage of his position, or cowed looks of hatred and fear from months of blackmail. Rarely did Herscherik ever receive a *friendly* look.

Oran slid himself between the puzzled Herscherik and the strange man. “You’re in the presence of His Highness. Introduce yourself.” With one hand on the hilt of his sword, Oran glared at the noble, his stance signaling his readiness to draw his sword. Kuro remained close to Herscherik, but observed the room to make sure that no one was watching this interaction too closely.

The noble seemed surprised by Oran’s words, but didn’t falter as he spoke up

just loud enough for Herscherik and his men to hear. “It’s Grim, Your Highness!”

“What...?” *The Count Grim?*! Herscherik’s eyes widened. The man before him was not as Herscherik remembered him. While he seemed as bald as ever, Grim’s gut had receded, giving him an age-appropriately healthy physique. The ambitious gleam in his eyes had subsided, replaced by an honest friendliness. “Count... Grim?” Herscherik asked in disbelief.

Grim cracked a smile. “It has been too long, Your Highness.”

Herscherik couldn’t believe his eyes. When he had last seen the count, he’d looked as if he was going to croak any day now. “You’ve... changed so much.” Herscherik suspected something nefarious lurked beneath the count’s smile, even though nothing had seemed amiss in the letters he regularly received from Meria and the other townsfolk. In fact, he had only read about how the weather was calm this year or how the count had imported some fertilizer that had led to a bountiful harvest... Good news all around, in other words.

I thought Grim might have just been putting on an act for me or his people, but... That simply didn’t explain his change. Herscherik would have wondered if the count had lost all that weight due to illness if it wasn’t for the shine on the count’s face and his healthily tanned skin.

“I thought you might be shocked, Your Highness. My weight isn’t as notable as it used to be! No more joint pains, and it certainly makes for a happy wife. Now if I could only grow some hair up here, ha ha ha!” Grim slapped the top of his bald head and looked around. After seeing that no one was paying them any mind, Grim lowered his voice further, while maintaining his same friendly expression. Even if anyone did see, it would have looked like the group were just engaged in some small talk.

“Please be careful, Prince Herscherik,” Grim said, his voice quiet. Those words made Herscherik narrow his eyes. If this was a trap, it was far too obvious. “Naturally, Your Highness has no reason to trust me. But I hope my warning may linger somewhere in your thoughts, at least.” Grim’s expression shifted, and he earnestly stared into Herscherik’s eyes. “I’ve started to hear rumors of the Prince of Light everywhere. Some will not be happy about this, but those are small-minded and short-sighted individuals. Precisely how I used

to be,” Grim added with an air of self-deprecation. A shadow flashed over his expression, and the count slapped his bald head again as if to conceal his emotions. “He is much more cunning than I. Please, be wary of your surroundings. Also, the situation is becoming less stable to the west and east of our nation. If Your Highness may keep that in mind.” The shadow returned on Grim’s face. “The things that I have done are unforgivable. I never expect something as trivial as this would earn Your Highness’s trust, nor atone for what I’ve done to my people or Count Ruseria—”

“Count Grim,” Herscherik smiled, interrupting the count. “Thank you. I have heard your words of caution... Please be careful, as well.”

“Thank you, Your Highness...” Grim swallowed the rest of his sentence, and bowed deeply. After keeping his head down for at least a few beats, Grim’s darkened expression was completely gone when he looked up once more. “Then, if you’ll excuse me. Oh, and Miss Meria is going to be wed soon. I was tasked with delivering the message, for a letter would have taken much too long.”

“Thank you, Count. Please give my congratulations to Meria. And tell her I will be sending a gift once everything settles, even if I can’t do it immediately.”

“Understood, Your Highness. Excuse me.”

Watching Grim give another bow and leave, Herscherik let out a sigh.

“What was that all about, Hersch?” asked Oran, who wasn’t quite aware of the prince’s history with the count.

“Oh, that’s right—you’d never met him before. That’s the count we told you about—the one from two years ago. Right, Kuro?”

Kuro concurred with a stiffened expression. “You think you can trust him?”

“I *want* to,” Herscherik answered without hesitation.

Two years prior, Herscherik made Grim kneel to him using blackmail. He had given Grim no other choice. Herscherik hadn’t expected the count to actually change, but seeing him now, Herscherik was beginning to believe that he might have actually turned his life around. “I might be naïve in thinking this, but... I want to believe that our country is moving in the right direction, no matter how

slowly.” That he wasn’t doing all of this in vain.

Herscherik gave his men a smile. There was a seemingly endless road ahead of them. Herscherik didn’t think that everything he’d done was just, nor did he dare to hope that every effort he made would result in a meaningful change. He wasn’t in the kind of fictional world that Ryoko had enjoyed reading about, where everything just seemed to fall in place. It was difficult to change the world, and far too easy to be changed yourself. Herscherik didn’t know when or how he would change from the person he was today. But, if this world allowed people to at least make an effort in the right direction, Herscherik knew his hard work was not wasted. He could continue carrying on.

“Herscherik!” someone called, just as he was about to leave.

Herscherik turned around to see a boy with short, light-green hair and light-brown eyes the color of topaz, who had a decidedly rambunctious look. Of course, the boy was older than Herscherik, but he was still a young boy to Herscherik’s mid-thirties brain. He was Reinette Gracis, the Fourth Prince and youngest of the triplets born to the Second Queen and the king. Reinette was as beautiful as any other member of the royal family. Ryoko would have described him as looking like a star player on a soccer team.

“Hello, Reinette.” Herscherik took a step towards his brother, looking up at him. Even though Herscherik had grown over the past few years, there was still a considerable height difference between the short and feeble Herscherik and his older brother. *I actually don’t remember the last time this brother actually talked to me in public.* Herscherik wondered what they were even going to talk about.

In fact, he rarely spoke to any of his siblings. He was younger than all of them by at least seven years, and they didn’t cross paths in their day-to-day lives very much. With a few exceptions, all of his siblings had duties to fulfill or attended school, while Herscherik usually snuck out of the castle on his days off. And even though they would greet each other in public, Herscherik bailed on most occasions after an hour or so. Unlike Ryoko and her sisters, Herscherik’s relationship with his siblings was rather business-like.

Not that he was unhappy with that. He understood how awkward it was for

his older siblings to interact with their much younger brother. You tend to take on more of a guardian role when you're that much older. Ryoko's youngest sister was nine years younger than her. While Ryoko recalled often arguing and fighting with the middle sister, she had never butted heads with her youngest sister; instead, she'd been the one to scold her sister when she misbehaved. That's why Herscherik didn't think to feel neglected and held his siblings, who always made sure to check on him in public and in private, in high regard.

I was surprised that Mark was actually the type to go easy on family.
Anyway... Herscherik returned his attention to Reinette.

"Yep. Father's looking for you, so I came to get you." Reinette flashed a toothy grin.

Herscherik smiled, as if the grin was contagious. "Thank you, but you didn't have to do all that yourself..." He could have sent a servant or a lady in waiting. What made Reinette take on the task personally?

Reinette waved his hand to dismiss Herscherik's curiosity. "Don't worry 'bout it. I had some time on my hands, and I wanted to see you. Beside, you're so good at getting lost in the crowd."

Herscherik chuckled at this. He did stand out in a crowd of commoners, as he had inherited some of the king's beauty... when he was the only royal around, anyway. When his family was nearby, as was the case in this ball, Herscherik did tend to blend into the crowd by comparison. Or, more accurately, the other princes and princesses soaked up all the attention. As Herscherik never liked to stand out anyway, he had always used that phenomenon to his advantage.

"It's easy to find you with our powers, and we were getting tired of dealing with those nobles, anyway," Reinette added, lowering his eyes. He had a mischievous look on his face.

"Powers?" "We?" Herscherik was just about to vocalize his confusion when two other figures emerged from the crowd. They were a boy and a girl who looked very much like Reinette—indeed, they had the same face.

"Reinette, why don't you let us know that you've found Herscherik?!"

"Cecily, you're being loud."

“You’re being too quiet, Arya. You’re the older brother—you have to keep him in check.”

“Ugh... Blah blah, blah... I just forgot it for a minute! You don’t have to talk my ears off about it.” Reinette covered his ears, visibly annoyed.

Herscherik realized that all three of the triplets must have been looking for him. Princess Cecily was technically the eldest. Her hair was a slightly wavy light green, and her almond-shaped eyes gave her an assertive look. She was wearing a yellow dress for the ball, but Herscherik couldn’t help but imagine her in a high school uniform, the studious leader type.

Arya was the Third Prince. His green hair was cut just above his shoulders, giving him a more reserved look. It was only natural that he ended up this way, trapped between his assertive sister and wild brother. Just like Reinette, their eyes were all the color of topaz. After some time, Herscherik was able to tell them apart, but that would be much harder if the triplets ever decided to don matching wigs—even though they would still have a slight difference in height.

“So what if I was born last? It wasn’t like I was much far behind! Quit acting like you know everything, Sis.”

“Then act smarter yourself. Arya and I are always the ones cleaning up after your stupid pranks. Remember when—”

“Typical girl, digging up the past again. Give me a break!”

As Herscherik watched them bicker, he considered his options. *Wasn’t Father looking for me? And we’re drawing some attention. A lot of attention...* The feuding prince and princess were indeed causing a scene—which was only natural, partially because of their own good looks. When all three were together, they became exponentially more eye-catching. Now that the crowd was staring, Herscherik couldn’t very well get away.

“You’re on my side, aren’t you, Herscherik?!”

“What?” While Herscherik had been concerned with the crowd, Reinette had pushed Herscherik in front of Cecily.

A fiery frown crossed the princess’s striking face. “Reinette! Keep Herscherik out of this. You’re putting him on the spot!” She tore Herscherik away from

Reinette and hugged him tight.

Herscherik felt something soft on his cheek. *She doesn't have as much... I mean, what's going on?* Herscherik was caught in a daze at how much his siblings were interacting with him today.

Oblivious to Herscherik's confusion, the sibling bickering continued to escalate. "It's a guy thing! You wouldn't get it!" Reinette yanked Herscherik out of Cecily's arms.

"Guy thing? Herscherik's a little boy!" Another tug, and Herscherik was back being pressed to Cecily's bosom.

"You're a girl, so you don't get it!"

"What's that supposed to mean?!"

"What do you *mean*, what's that supposed to mean?!"

"Stop it, you two. Look at Herscherik!"

After that tug of war session, Herscherik ended up panting, with Arya standing in between him and the other two triplets. It was like they were children fighting over a Herscherik plushie. *I'm not a stuffed animal... What are Kuro and Oran doing, anyway?* He turned to his men of service, who hadn't said a word. They were watching the entire ordeal, like they had nothing to do with it. It was evident that they had no intention of rescuing their master in his hour of need. *What about your oath, you traitors?! ...Retribution shall be dealt with an iron fist. Hostile work environment? Never heard of it.*

"What are you doing...?" A half-chuckling, half-exasperated voice called. The ladies in the crowd let out a reserved cheer before it split to allow for him to come through.

"Mark..." Herscherik gave a pleading look to his brother.

Marx Gracis, the Royal Prince with eyes and hair like melted rubies, let out a chuckle at Herscherik's pleading. He was one of the few people in the kingdom who was privy to Herscherik's operation and an important pillar of support for him. "You went to go get Hersch. What are you keeping him for?"

"I'm sorry..." the triplets replied in unison.

“Sorry about that, Hersch. I’m sure you were about to head out, but can I bother you for a little longer?”

“Of course,” Herscherik nodded, internally grinning. *Mark totally gets it.* Herscherik never stayed at parties longer than he had to. He tried to leave when no one was looking, but his brother had apparently taken notice.

Marx knelt down to meet Herscherik at eye level, gently stroking his brother’s hair. His expression became serious for a moment and he lowered his voice. “If something happens... even if *nothing* does, come talk to me. All right?”

While Herscherik agreed, he had a bad feeling that he wouldn’t return to his room as quickly as he’d wanted to. Led by his brother, Herscherik walked through the parting crowd. The triplets followed him, then Kuro and Oran behind them. *More eyes on me than usual...* Maintaining his customer service smile, Herscherik repressed his urge to flee back to his room. Marx, and even the triplets behind him, had wiped the age-appropriate look from their face and replaced it with a placid demeanor befitting royalty. Herscherik barely recognized them, but he imagined that dealing with adoring crowds was just part of their daily routine, as fascinating as it still was to him. That’s what they’d been born into, after all. Herscherik, on the other hand, felt like he was being put under a microscope any time he garnered any attention whatsoever, partially due to his experience living as Ryoko. He understood that this was the job of a royal, but he still couldn’t help being embarrassed.

“Father. Herscherik is here.”

As Herscherik was lost in his thoughts, he’d been led into the king’s presence before he even knew it. Marx urged him to step forward. The king had platinum hair that looked like solidified moonlight and the eyes the same color as Herscherik’s. Despite being over forty, he didn’t look any older than mid-twenties.

King Solye, a shining jewel in the kingdom’s crown, welcomed his children. “Thank you, Marx. And Cecily, Arya, Reinette.” Solye smiled at each child, which was met by a shy smile in return. “Sorry, Herscherik. I’m sure you’re getting tired...”

“No, Father. Is there something I can do for you?” Herscherik observed his

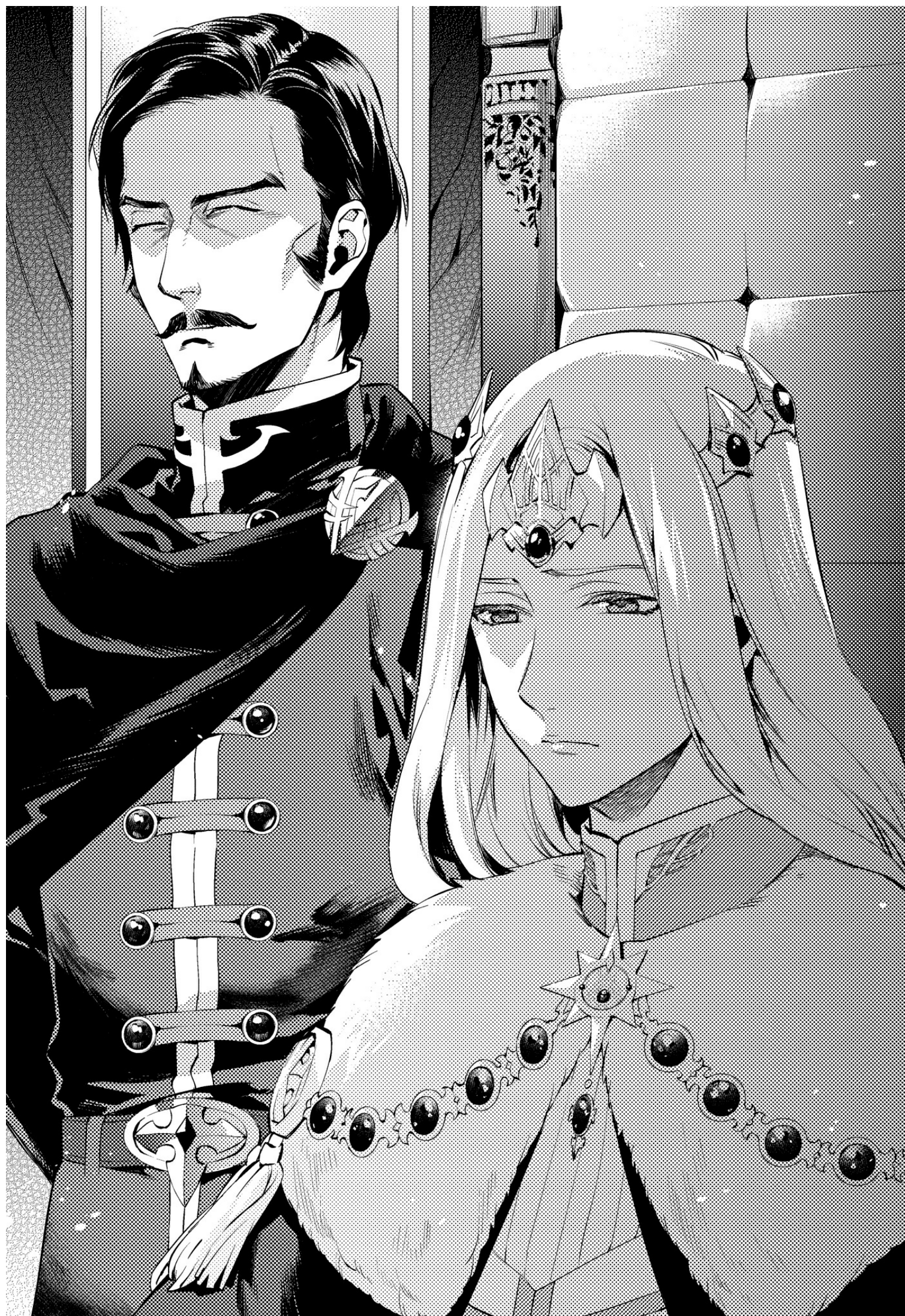
father. *He looks a little unwell today.* Solye already had pale skin that would make any woman a little jealous, but now it seemed as though there was a shadow fallen over his beautiful face. Perhaps it was simply the lighting. But then, Herscherik realized who was standing by his father.

I've arrived at a battlefield.

As soon as he recognized it as such, Herscherik drew his weapon—a beaming smile—and spoke to the figure. “Long time no see, Minister Barbosse.”

“Indeed, Prince Herscherik. How Your Highness has grown...” The man with the distinctive mustache bowed low in response.

Herscherik still thought that this man was as formidable as the day they first encountered each other. The Marquis Volf Barbosse was a minister, and the ringleader of the corrupt nobility. Behind the scenes, he was the one controlling the country with a dagger at the king’s back. Herscherik had been investigating the man since he was three years old, and he still had hardly any incriminating evidence to show for it. The scene might have appeared courteous enough to those not in the know, but those who did could clearly see the sparks flying.



Oran and Kuro naturally moved to stand behind Herscherik. While their expressions were unchanged, Kuro prepared to draw his hidden weapons, and Oran had gotten close enough to strike down Barbosse in one motion. While none of them expected things to reach that point, the gesture in and of itself carried some weight.

Sensing his men in service behind him, Herscherik cheerfully answered the minister. "Thank you. Father. Was it the minister who wanted me here?" Herscherik maintained his smile while his eyes glared like daggers.

"Herscherik..." the king started reluctantly.

Before he could finish, Barbosse took a step forward. "If I may speak, Your Majesty?" Barbosse said, a command in the guise of a question. Solye could never defy him. Seeing that the king nodded, Barbosse approached Herscherik, who sensed his men stir behind him; he stopped them with a gesture behind his back. When Barbosse came three steps away from Herscherik, he stopped. "Your Highness will be turning seven this year."

"Yes, that's right..." Herscherik confirmed, confused as to why Barbosse mentioned his age.

"So will my daughter. She is the same age as Your Highness," Barbosse informed Herscherik with a smile. "I would love nothing more to see my daughter engaged to Your Highness."

Herscherik couldn't comprehend it. He knew what the word meant. "Engaged." Entering a relationship with the intention to marry. Did he really say that? *Who's* getting engaged to *who*? Herscherik was left uncharacteristically dismayed, his brain stalling for a moment. When it finally rebooted, Herscherik could only mutter one word. "What...?"

Chapter Two: Shooting the Breeze, the Visit, and the Contact

The day after the New Year's ball, Herscherik sat on his favorite sofa in his room. Having eaten breakfast already, he was looking out the window with a woeful expression. Three people occupied the room: Herscherik, Kuro (who was preparing their post-meal tea), and Oránge, who sat on the chair by the door cleaning his sword. An awkward mood had settled over the room. The awkwardness—and Herscherik's morose expression—was caused by the arrangement Minister Barbosse had proposed the day before.

"Ugh, the old fox is trying to bury the hatchet..." Herscherik *tsked*, in stark contrast to his precious appearance. Neither of his men condemned his un-princely behavior. If anything, they shared the sentiment.

It wasn't unusual for royalty or nobles to be engaged at young ages. In fact, marrying for love was the exception rather than the rule in this society, especially a marriage like the one between Herscherik's parents. Some of Herscherik's siblings were already engaged, or had at least narrowed down candidates for engagement. A royal marriage was a powerful tool for bolstering the nation's prosperity—although the current king typically gave his children the ultimate authority in choosing their spouses.

Herscherik had recognized the possibility of one day being engaged to marry the daughter of a powerful noble, or even marrying into a foreign royal family. The issue with this particular engagement, however, was his future spouse. As the youngest prince who had no powerful patrons, marrying the daughter of the Marquis Barbosse would be an impactful political move. The Marquis Aldis, father to Herscherik's knight of service Oran, could have been considered Herscherik's patron—but since Roland, the head of the house, had retired from his position as general and his sons were not highly ranked despite their knighthood, they didn't hold any political power that Herscherik could really rely on.

If Herscherik would agree to marry the minister's daughter, the Marquis Barbosse himself would become his chief patron. His name was one of the most prestigious in the nation—in many ways, the minister was the true ruler of Gracis. Herscherik's currently nonexistent status would skyrocket if he accepted this engagement. If the minister wished it, Herscherik could very well become the next king, despite all of his older siblings. What's more, even though Herscherik's father usually gave his children the final say when it came to their own marriages, he had no choice in the matter if Minister Barbosse was the one requesting.

What is Barbosse planning...? Herscherik asked himself, as he replayed the events of the previous night.

"I think... I am unworthy of the offer, Minister." Herscherik managed to squeeze out after the ballroom had fallen silent. The young prince had composed his face into a slightly confused, humble smile as he observed the room. Even the members of the royal family were looking on in awe. His father, in particular, looked like he was going to pass out. The Sixth Prince, who was studying abroad, as well as the Fifth Prince and Second Princess were not in attendance to offer any objections.

"As humble as always, Your Highness!" Barbosse gave a hearty and dramatic laugh. "Your Highness' wisdom never ceases to amaze me... And you have an upstanding character to match. I would rest easy knowing that my dear daughter will live out her days with someone like Your Highness... What do you say?"

'Wisdom,' huh? Biting sarcasm, Barbosse. You think I'd fall for that? Silently cursing him, Herscherik calculated his next move. *I suppose this is how he wants to play it, instead of taking me out... Assassinations, I can prevent.* Herscherik had initiated Operation Fortune Favors the Bold for this very reason. In fact, there had already been a few assassinations and attempted poisonings directed at him, but Kuro and Oran had made short work of that. His plan had been to wear out Barbosse's patience until he made a risky move they could pin on him.

Alas, the minister wasn't making it that easy for Herscherik. Now, the little prince found himself faced with a conundrum. A tactless 'no' might bring harm onto his father and siblings. On the other hand, he couldn't simply walk right

into Barbosse's trap.

"Minister Barbosse, would it not be too hasty to deliver a response right here and now?" Marx stepped forward, as if to protect Herscherik as he struggled to answer. Even as he showed the minister his universally-loved smile, the look in his eyes was ice cold. "Herscherik is wise beyond his years, and he certainly has a bright future ahead of him. But he's still only a child. Besides, this may be too public a place to discuss something as sensitive as a marriage. This is a decision that will last the rest of their lives, after all." In other words, Marx told the minister to 'look around,' albeit in more politically correct words.

The minister laughed, diffusing the accusation. "Absolutely. It seems I'm getting ahead of myself. Speaking of, Prince Marx—has Your Highness any news in that department?"

"This is not the place to discuss my future, either."

"Now, now. Your Highness will be leading our country, one day. As a servant of the nation, I can not help but be concerned."

A bitter look flashed in Marx's expression. "Terribly sorry for worrying everyone," he responded with his usual smile.

Herscherik had asked Marx about this after the party to find out that he had a potential fiancée, but hadn't gone through with the engagement. Apparently, Marx was in love with someone who didn't return his affection.

"You're still not over her, Mark...?" Oran shook his head knowingly.

At the end of the day, both parties settled on Herscherik holding a meeting with Minister Barbosse's daughter at a later date.

"What are you going to do, Hersch?" Oran asked, obviously referring to the very incident that was weighing on Herscherik's mind.

"I haven't really got a choice... I have to meet her." At this point, refusal wasn't an option. Herscherik knew full well that, despite his royal birth, the minister outranked him. And, despite any sinister intentions that might be lurking behind it, this was by all appearances a fairly ordinary proposal.

"I could take him out," Kuro muttered as he placed the tea on the table.

Herscherik looked up to see his butler's eyes glowing like rubies lit by an eerie fire. "No, Kuro," he reprimanded.

"I'm kidding..." Kuro turned away, half-pouting.

No you weren't! I saw blood in your eyes! Herscherik gave Kuro a side-eye.

"But what do we do now?" Oran asked. "You don't think it's an honest-to-goodness marriage proposal, do you?"

Herscherik nodded. He suspected the minister's intention was something like bringing him—the biggest potential hazard—into the fold, dividing the royal family as a result. It was efficient. But was he willing to sacrifice his own daughter for his scheme? It was an absolutely despicable thing for a parent to do, but it seemed entirely in character for the minister. The man had assassinated Herscherik's grandfather, uncle, and his father's first daughter when she was only a year old. Would someone capable of such things really treat his own daughter any differently?

"If I can't say no, I'll make *her* say it." Herscherik sighed, unable to come up with anything else. "If I make her hate me enough, they'll have to drop the whole thing. If he still pushes for the engagement after that, I'll give a hard no with the excuse of being concerned for his daughter."

"That seems the path of least resistance." Oran would have felt guilty forcing such a young girl into a situation like that, even if it was the minister's daughter.

"If they say there's something wrong with you..." Kuro muttered with the same dark tone as before.

"Hey, Kuro—whose side are you on? And let's drop the assassination threats, *please*," Herscherik interjected, which was only met with a shrug from Kuro.

Marriage... Despite his male body, Herscherik's mind had always leaned towards a female mindset, due to Ryoko's memories. *I was never even interested in marriage, or relationships, for that matter. Well, in the real world, anyway.* In the world of fiction, Ryoko had lived through countless relationships. Would he really be able to get married, or even see this girl as a romantic partner in any way? Especially when Herscherik felt mostly female inside.

A female mind in a male body... I mean, I have accepted the fact that I'm in a

male body now. Some things were different, certainly, but overall Herscherik had never really encountered any impediments in his life on account of his new anatomy. *I mean, people get used to things. After getting eyes full of men's bodies every day, I suppose I got acclimated to them.*

In fact, there were much bigger things than his own anatomy that Herscherik had to be concerned about. Herscherik had often wondered how things would have been different if he had been born a woman in this world, too. *Well, I wouldn't be in this predicament, for one.* If he hadn't been born a prince, he might not have even been given a choice in the matter. As a princess, his father might have kept him completely in the dark until he was married off to some distant allied nation where he would be safe. *I don't think I would act any differently if I was a princess, though,* Herscherik concluded in the end.

At this point, he glanced at his two men of service. They were good looking men. *If I was born a girl, would I have a crush on them?* Both of them were handsome and competent. In fact, they were quite popular among the handmaidens of the castle and the women of the castle town. If this had been fiction, Ryoko-turned-Herscherik might have felt something for them. Alas, despite living in a fantasy world of swords and magic, this was still undoubtedly reality. *I'm like twenty years older than them, and they work for me.* Herscherik, no matter how he looked on the outside, was a 34-year-old woman on the inside. With his previous life and this one combined, he had lived over forty years. What's more, Ryoko had never been interested in real-life romance to begin.

"So... Do either of you have a girlfriend?" Herscherik had really only mentioned it as something to talk about that might distract from the problem at hand. His two men, however, froze in their tracks upon hearing their master's question.

"That was... sudden," Oran countered.

"Just curious. You're both popular," Herscherik explained truthfully. "I've seen both of you getting asked out pretty often." Herscherik had, in fact, witnessed both of them being practically cornered by girls both in the castle and while out and about. On the other hand, he had never seen either of them actually spending time with any of the girls who approached them.

“I turn them all down...” Oran answered with a sigh. “I know I have to move on eventually, but I’m not ready.” While over three years had passed since the death of his fiancée, he still couldn’t get over her. In fact, he didn’t even *want* to. Oran was faithful—so much so that even the women he’d rejected couldn’t find it in their hearts to speak ill of him for it. “What about you, Black Dog?”

“What *about* me?”

“I’ve seen you engaged in a lover’s quarrel or two!” Oran proudly declared.

Kuro scoffed. “I’m not in a relationship with *anyone*. You must be mistaken.”

“Mistaken...?”

“As Hersch’s butler, I’m only trying to maintain an efficient work environment. They were all useful sources of information.”

Oran was speechless. Kuro considered anyone but Herscherik (and Oran, although he’d never admit it) nothing more than pawns on a chess board he could take advantage of. He had a very cut-and-dry outlook, as befitting his former profession.

Herscherik felt a twinge of concern for Kuro and all of the women who looked at him with stars in their eyes. “Girls’ feelings are delicate, Kuro. You have to be kind to them.” Herscherik reprimanded Kuro—without mentioning the fundamental problem with his mindset, of course.

After this point, Kuro did begin to treat the women who approached him with more kindness. Of course, that only led to his popularity increasing, dooming even more women to rejection.

“What about you Hersch? What kind of girls do you like?” Oran retaliated.

Herscherik put a hand to his chin and considered. *Someone older, I guess? I really like Mister Rook’s voice.* Herscherik recalled his father’s butler of service. His grounded attitude, humble demeanor, and his deep voice that reminded him of a voice actor Ryoko had liked. “Someone grounded... definitely the mature type, I guess.” Herscherik refrained from mentioning the specific person he was thinking about. “Someone wise and kind, but who’s firm in their beliefs.” *They would have to be a good person,* Herscherik thought to himself, nodding.

“What about looks?” Kuro asked.

This kind of conversation was a first for Herscherik. *I can't believe this is my first time 'shooting the breeze' with them*, Herscherik realized. “Um... Doesn't really matter, I guess. Once you fall for someone, everything looks... Oh, but...” Herscherik clapped his hands together. “I do like blond hair and light-colored eyes!” Many of Ryoko's favorite characters were blond-haired and blue-eyed. That was the stereotypical look for a prince, after all. *Silver hair and black hair are cool too, and I like Kuro's red eyes and Oran's orange eyes, but I can't turn my back on the classics!* Content with that conclusion, Herscherik reached for the now completely cold cup of tea.

“Calm, wise, kind, and has firm beliefs...?”

“Blonde hair and light eyes...?”

The men of service gave each other a look before turning to their tea-sipping master in unison. The prince had literally just described... himself. Neither of them had a response to that, so the conversation ended there.

A week had now passed since the New Year's ball. At the sound of a reserved knock on the door, the figure in the room marked his page in the book he was reading. “Come on in, Herscherik,” the figure called to the door as he set the book aside. Even without hearing the visitor's voice, he knew that no one but Herscherik would come knocking at his door at this hour—and with such a quiet knock at that.

“Thank you, Brother Eutel.”

Just as Eutel had guessed, his youngest brother Herscherik poked his head into the door. Eutel greeted him with a smile. “Thank you for always coming to see me. Sorry I'm just stuck here in bed.” He apologetically looked down at himself.

Herscherik hurriedly shook his head in denial. “Please... I'm always the one interrupting you.”

This room belonged to Eutel Gracis, the Fifth Prince of Gracis and son to the king and the Second Queen. He was fifteen years old, with wavy, lavender hair

that fell to his shoulders and deep blue eyes that gave off a cold, unapproachable aura. However, Eutel had a soft expression that counteracted that cold gaze, so people usually had a warm impression of him overall. As a member of the royal family, he was blessed with picturesque beauty. However, now his cheeks were sunken and his skin was deathly pale. After taking ill with a fever the previous summer, Eutel had been confined to his bed by the window for half of a year.

“How are you doing?” Herscherik asked, concerned.

“I’m doing all right,” Eutel answered as he welcomed his brother. “The good weather helps.” He smiled faintly, his sunken cheeks accentuating his sickliness.

Of course, Herscherik couldn’t mention any of that. He only smiled politely. “I’m glad. Oh, here are some sweets that Schwarz made. Please take them for when you have more of an appetite.” Herscherik handed over a paper bag containing cookies that contained a few different nuts. These were the same cookies that Herscherik had for tea that day.

“Thank you. Your butler makes delicious sweets, Herscherik. Speaking of... is no one with you today?”

“No, they’re both a little busy today.”

Herscherik’s men of service had a lot more to do than just watching over him. While Kuro kept house and performed some office duties by day, he performed various reconnaissance missions by night. And though Oran’s main duty was in fact guarding Herscherik, the army had requested that he assist with the training of knights and soldiers now that he’d shown off his true potential. Oran now joined their training a few times a week. He didn’t mind working with the soldiers and knights, but he couldn’t stand how his brothers insisted on bothering him throughout.

Besides, I’m under strict orders not to leave the castle, Herscherik thought, unbothered by the fact that this made it sound like *Kuro* was the one in charge. In fact, ever since the initiation of Operation Fortune Favors the Bold, his life had been in danger several times. There had been assassination attempts, some covert and some simply made to look like accidents. After those incidents, he was no longer able to easily leave the castle at his own discretion.

I don't want to die just yet... It'd be a lot easier if I could just protect myself... Herscherik let out a quiet sigh, frustrated with his meager combat skills. While having no Magic completely ruled out spellcasting training for him, he had kept up with his sword and horse-riding training since he was three. *Perseverance is strength, they said...* He was really hopeless when it came to the sword, although he had finally learned to get his horse to trot without assistance. After four whole years. *How embarrassing.* Herscherik cried a single tear—internally, of course.

Besides all of that, he fully understood the precarious position he was in. The rumors of his potential engagement to the minister's daughter had spread throughout the castle and swiftly permeated throughout the entirety of high society. Even though nothing had been officially decided, most nobles considered them as good as engaged already. In fact, a few nobles looking to curry favor with Herscherik had sent him gifts to congratulate him. The prince sent back all such gifts, but he was still being subjected to intense scrutiny.

With all of this going on, Herscherik had come to visit Eutel. His room was also in the Outer Quarters, so Herscherik could safely go there without a bodyguard. *But Brother Eutel really doesn't look well.* Eutel had never been the healthy-as-a-bull type, but as far as Herscherik had heard, he used to be able to attend the academy without issue. Now, however, he looked drained of color, and had apparently entirely lost his appetite.

When Herscherik first heard that Eutel had fallen ill, he thought immediately of that mysterious 'sickness' that only ailed royalty. That concern, however, was unfounded. According to the doctor, the balance between his Magic and his vessel had been thrown off, affecting Eutel's already-fragile body. People of this world all had Magic Within, and a vessel to keep that Magic in their bodies. This "vessel" was not exactly an organ, but something else entirely. Ordinarily, one's magic never exceeded the capacity of that vessel, like maximum MP in the video games Ryoko remembered. On rare occasions, though, one's magic could overflow that vessel. When that happened, the body was overwhelmed, and the unfortunate person would become bedridden, just like Eutel.

The royal doctor declared that Eutel's condition wasn't something that medicine could fix. There were only two cures—wait until his vessel naturally

increased in capacity, or attempt to speed up that process through training. The problem was that there was no pointing in waiting for the vessel to grow larger if the magic within it grew at the same rate. With strenuous training, Eutel's frail body could end up in an even worse state. At the end of the day, all Eutel could do was wait for natural recovery. Concerned for his brother's condition, Herscherik came to visit whenever he could. Even today, Herscherik had studied all morning, but he still found time to visit Eutel after lunch, before his afternoon tasks began.

"You're frowning again, Herscherik." Eutel tapped the end of his index finger in between Herscherik's brows. Giggling, he massaged the frown line that had formed on his brother's forehead.

"I'm sorry..." Herscherik apologized for giving his brother more reason for concern—and after specifically coming to cheer him up, too.

"You overthink everything, Herscherik. I'm all right. Promise." Eutel smiled, and Herscherik could only nod in response. "And besides, you're in a tougher spot than I am right now. I heard that pig of a minister's trying to set you up."

"Pig... What?" Herscherik widened his eyes in shock—he was surprised that the rumors of his proposed engagement had even reached his bedridden brother, but even more so that the gentle Eutel would use such language.

Then, a knock was heard at the door, much more forceful than Herscherik's. At Eutel's permission, another older brother of theirs entered the room. "Will? Aren't you supposed to be at work?"

"I needed to see you about something, Eutel. How are you doing... Herscherik? Here again?" The figure who entered spoke to Eutel, and gave Herscherik a half-hearted glance. He was William Gracis, the Second Prince. His hair, platinum like his father's, was grown out and loosely braided in the back. The gaze of his blue eyes, in contrast to Eutel's gentleness, was ice cold.

"Hello, Brother William." Herscherik rushed to bow upon meeting those icy eyes.

William only looked at Herscherik for a moment before returning to Eutel. Herscherik wondered if William's expression was much warmer when he looked at Eutel than at him or if it was just his imagination. While all the royal children

shared a father, William and Eutel also had the same mother. Perhaps that contributed to how close they seemed compared to Herscherik's other brothers.



I understand that he'll be a little more distant to me because we have different mothers... But did I do something wrong? Herscherik couldn't help but feel a little sad. Things had changed. Even though he didn't see William often, he had never been treated so coldly. First the triplets were way too touchy-feely, and now William was treating him like he didn't exist. Herscherik thought back on everything he'd done recently, but couldn't come up with anything that explained this change of attitude. He let out a quiet sigh.

In the end, Herscherik decided to let his two brothers talk and walked towards the door without another word. Once out of the room, he heaved a sigh as he turned away from the door. At that moment, Herscherik noticed someone basking in the sunlight pouring through the window, gazing out at the view.

The first thing that came to Herscherik's mind upon seeing this person was "Shiro the cat."

A cat with striking golden eyes and pure white fur had roamed Ryoko's neighborhood, and she had given it the name Shiro. On her commute home, Ryoko would call to Shiro as he sat perched along a concrete wall next to the sidewalk, and the cat would always meow in return as if to welcome her home.

Herscherik had made the connection because the person before him looked exactly like that white cat.

The person by the window was shorter than Kuro or Oran and had long, straight, and stark white hair that fell below their waist. Their skin was pale as alabaster, and their eyes were a gleaming golden amber color. Moreover, they were so beautiful that Herscherik could only imagine they had been blessed by the goddess of beauty herself. He was certain that this person could entrance anyone they liked with a single smile.

The way this beautiful person furrowed their shapely brow and glanced away when they saw Herscherik only ended up reminding him even more of Shiro the cat.

I never thought there was anyone in this world more beautiful than my father or brothers... Having been surrounded by gorgeous people since his reincarnation, Herscherik thought he'd grown immune to them. But the beauty

of the person before him was so perfect that it compared to—or even surpassed—anyone in his family. *What a gorgeous woman... er, is she a woman?* Herscherik titled his head.

There was something... *lacking* from the incomparably beautiful figure before him. One of their arms, which emerged from their snow white robe adorned with a few bracelets, was a little on the frail and delicate side. More importantly, there was one important curve missing from their silhouette. *She doesn't have breasts...?* Even a small bust would show a tiny bit of curve, but this person's robe fell in a straight line across their chest. *No way...!* Herscherik timidly looked up from the person's bosom.

"What?" A light but unmistakably *male* voice emerged from that pair of shapely lips.

This fantasy world defies gender...! How fantastic! Herscherik silently shouted; he found himself nearly tearing up a bit, for some reason.

"Is that a way to speak to a prince?" a different voice called.

Herscherik turned around to spot a man in his late forties, dressed in the elaborate robes of a priest. His white-speckled brown hair peeked out from under his head covering, and wrinkles at the corners of his eyes gave him a warm expression. The man approached Herscherik and knelt, which brought him down to the little prince's eye level. "It is an honor to make your acquaintance, Prince Herscherik. My name is Hoenir, and I am the head of the Church of Light here in Gracis." The man smiled.

Herscherik recognized the name. *So this is the Hoenir, Archbishop of the Church of Light...* The Church of Light was the most common religion across the entire continent. This religion honored numerous gods, who all ruled the Garden Above, with a single creator god at their helm. Their holy scripture described the manner in which the gods maintained the world, and most followers worshiped the creator god and another god who was relevant to their lives. For example, a farmer might worship the creator god and the goddess of the harvest, or a fisherman might worship the goddess of the sea. Knights would often honor a deity that ruled over warfare.

Herscherik and the rest of the royal family did not subscribe to any religion.

While freedom of religion was a right recognized in Gracis Kingdom, the rulers of the country were supposed to remain impartial, without any religious influence.

“It’s a pleasure, Archbishop Hoenir.” Herscherik gave a charming smile, all the while observing the man’s each and every move.

Even after they’d discovered that the Church was involved in drug trafficking, no amount of research had led them to any concrete evidence. All they could find was common knowledge and conjecture. “The fact that we can’t find anything on them only means they have perfect control over information that gets out,” Kuro had said. Then, he added that they ought to be suspicious of any lead that was *too* obvious, as it might be a trap.

Now, the archbishop had appeared before Herscherik in the flesh. “What are you doing in the castle, Archbishop?” Archbishops were each in charge of their own diocese and they rarely ventured outside of that. Why was he here in the outer quarter of the castle?

“Herscherik!” A forceful voice called his name just as Hoenir was about to answer his question. Herscherik turned around to see William, his handsome face bitterly twisted in frustration. “Do you need something from my guest?” His deep blue eyes pierced straight into Herscherik’s soul.

Herscherik didn’t understand why William seemed so unhappy. Just as he was about to say something, Hoenir beat him to it. The archbishop stood up and stepped in front of the little prince as if protecting him before giving a deep bow. “Your Highness, I was the one who approached Prince Herscherik. Forgive my intrusion,” Hoenir said, which only made William frown even more deeply. Hoenir gave William an indulgent smile before turning back to Herscherik. “Your Highness, I am here to treat Prince Eutel.”

“Really? May I ask how?” Herscherik asked, glancing at William over Hoenir’s shoulder. The image of that drug they’d only recently eradicated flashed into his mind.

Hoenir continued, smiling as if he knew what the prince was thinking and wished to alleviate his suspicions. “I wield Divine Healing magic.”

“Really...” While Herscherik, who had no Magic Within to speak of, had only

studied the basics of spellcasting, he knew how rare users of Healing magic were. Only a tiny fraction of the population even possessed the special sort of Magic Within that Healing spells required; Herscherik had read that the number was only one out of every ten thousand people. Moreover, actually using those spells required specialized spellcasting training, medical knowledge equivalent to that of a doctor, and—depending upon what they were treating—an enormous reserve of magical power.

Almost all users of Healing magic that *did* exist were associated with the Church. Healing magic was classed as Divine magic, and the Church essentially had a monopoly on knowledge about it; the vast majority of advanced users of Healing magic were Church officials. The fact that Hoenir could wield Healing magic that might aid Eutel's complicated condition was a testament to his prowess as a Spellcaster.

"Herscherik. Archbishop Hoenir is here to treat Eutel. Go back to your room."

Herscherik obediently nodded in response to William's command. He had no other choice. *It's okay. Healing magic can't do any harm*, Herscherik told himself, then turned to leave.

Before he could make his exit, Hoenir called to him. "Prince. Does Your Highness have some time to spare?" The Archbishop smiled at him.

"I think so," Herscherik answered, even as he began to sense something amiss behind Hoenir's smile—a different kind of dishonesty than he felt from Barbosse.

"Come here." Hoenir called the beautiful young man away from the window. He walked up to Hoenir with the same frown on his face, gave Herscherik a momentary glance, then turned to Hoenir again. "Your Highness, this is my adopted son. He has been studying at the Church's citadel most of his life, but as this year is his coming of age, I have summoned him to the capital. He was raised within the Church and knows little of the world." Hoenir chuckled, patting the young man on the shoulder. "The only thing he shows interest in is magic, and he keeps to himself—so I had him accompany me today. However, I can't very well bring him into Prince Eutel's room when His Highness isn't well," Hoenir continued his explanation with the same gentle smile. He paid no mind

to the fact that his adopted child was looking increasingly unhappy. In fact, Herscherik was beginning to worry about that. “Prince, if you have any time to spare, would Your Highness be so kind as to show him around the castle?”

Herscherik pondered, examining Hoenir’s smile. Fortune Favors the Bold... Part Two? Both Minister Barbosse and the Church seemed to be making their moves, as if they were in perfect sync. Herscherik would have complained about this, if it didn’t seem almost like he was being handed an opportunity on a silver platter.

“Yes, I’d love to!” Herscherik innocently smiled at Hoenir. The expression of the handsome young man grew darker, but Herscherik paid him no mind.

William’s expression had also grown more stern, but the little prince did not notice.

Chapter Three: Shiro, the Magic Nerd, and the Odd One Out

After leaving Eutel's room, Herscherik began leading the androgynous young man down the hall. *Who knows what that archbishop's scheming, but I'll take my chances.* The Church approaching him after such a long period of no-contact was the perfect opportunity. Herscherik had reached the conclusion that, no matter what trap they were leading him into, it was better than having them continue to do their dirty work out of sight.

I doubt they'll come at my throat in the castle anyway... Oh? Herscherik realized that he was starting to draw more eyes than usual. He had resigned to a certain amount of uncomfortable attention attached to his princely status, but this was almost alarming... until he saw that everyone they passed was actually gazing right above his head and straight at the person following him.

There was a saying in Japan that a beautiful woman could single-handedly topple a nation. While the person following behind him was not technically a woman, Herscherik couldn't help but think the saying still applied. His beauty was truly superhuman. As if to prove his point, even the workers in the royal quarters, who were all accustomed to seeing the country's most beautiful faces on a daily basis, were all stopped in their tracks as they passed, entranced by the man's appearance.

He's simply stunning. There's no other way to put it. Herscherik stole a glance without slowing down. In fact, the man had a different sort of beauty than Herscherik's father or brothers. While the members of the royal family were attractive, no one would have mistaken them for a woman. William and Eutel might have been a bit on the androgynous side, but they were still clearly male. Almost no one would think the person following Herscherik now was actually a man, though, unless they heard his voice. Even then, he spoke in a bright tenor that could easily pass for a woman's voice.

"What is it...?" the man asked, picking up on Herscherik's stare.

“Oh...” Herscherik hesitated for a beat, then timidly asked: “You’re really... not a woman?”

“Huh?”

“I’m sorry!” Herscherik immediately apologized, as the man had glared back at him with a full-blown scowl. *The beautiful ones have the fiercest temper—it’s true! He’s kinda scaring me!* As droplets of cold sweat trickled down his back, Herscherik began to hurry toward their destination when a thought occurred to him.

I don’t know his name. He had neglected to ask, although Herscherik ultimately blamed the archbishop for skipping introductions.

“Now what?”

Herscherik cowered for a moment beneath the glare of the now even grumpier pretty-boy. Once again, he was reminded of the white cat that had lived in Ryoko’s neighborhood. *The resemblance is uncanny.* Shiro was a fickle cat who would give a little meow when he was happy, but only ever gave Ryoko a side eye and the swipe of the tail when he was not. Since the cat wasn’t exactly skinny and had a coat as white as a freshly laundered towel, Ryoko had always wondered if the cat belonged to someone. On the other hand, Shiro wore no collar and was out and about late at night. Perhaps he had a few houses that he frequented.

With the image of Shiro the white cat on his mind, Herscherik looked up to meet the man’s eyes. “May I ask your name?”

“You don’t need it. I’m not your servant.”

Herscherik let out a sigh at the stark rejection. *Shiro was as cold as ice, too, when he wasn’t happy. Of course, the cat at least had a soft side. He’d at least let me pet him when he was happy.* Recalling how cute the cat had been, Herscherik returned his gaze to the man behind him. Speaking in such a way to royalty was enough cause to put him under arrest—though Herscherik himself preferred the cavalier attitude to the usual brown-nosing and thought it absolutely ridiculous to lock anyone up for something like that. Moreover, he decided to be an adult despite his appearance and forgive the teenager.

That being said, it was inconvenient not to have a name to address him by. “I see... Then I’ll call you Shiro.”

“What!?” The man’s brow shot up.

Herscherik responded with a bright smile. “It’s really inconvenient for me *not* to have a name to call you. What choice do I have if you won’t tell me your real name?” The little prince thought back to how he’d also given Kuro his name without permission as he carefully observed the handsome face before him.

The beautiful young man’s jaw dropped. *I feel like he’s not subtle enough to pull off some clever scheme. It’s not in his nature, I think. Even though he’s got quite the bite.* If this young man had an ulterior motive, he would have tried to conceal his irritation. Anyone with something to hide wore a pleasant mask for the purpose. It was the same with Minister Barbosse, Archbishop Hoenir, and even Herscherik, who played the harmless little prince. In a way, he was no different from either of them. Herscherik scoffed in self-deprecation—that was the reason he could glimpse those cracks in the mask so easily, after all.

“So, Mister Shiro. I’ll show you to the library first. We have some rare prints, so it’s a wonderful place if you’re interested. Oh, and...” Herscherik bowed apologetically. Shiro was taken aback at the sudden gesture, but Herscherik didn’t notice. “I’m really sorry I mistook you for a woman.” Without waiting for a response, Herscherik straightened his back and started down the hall again.

Shiro looked like he wanted to say something, but Herscherik wasn’t sure what it was. *I still can’t say if he’s with the enemy.* The prince contemplated his companion as they walked along. At the very least, he didn’t sense any animosity or ill intent from him. Caution was important, but acting on preconceptions and assumptions was a dangerous game with irreversible consequences. *But the Church made its move... Something must be afoot.* That much seemed undeniable.

Herscherik invited Shiro into the library, thoughts whirring inside his brain behind his harmless, pleasant mask. He didn’t miss Shiro’s grumpiness vanishing as soon as he entered the room. *Yep. I was hyped when I first came here, too.* The library was in the eastern wing of the castle, in the middle of the department of Magic and Research. It spanned three stories, and every inch of

the walls was covered in books.

This place is a bibliophile's paradise. Who needs fresh air when you can have this? Herscherik had begun his studies at age three and scoured through practically every book in the royal library. Eventually the royal collection wasn't enough, so Herscherik began frequenting the castle's main library with his father's permission. Of course, his book-loving father had been excited to grant him access.

Taking note of Herscherik's entrance, the librarian stood to greet them, but the prince stopped him with the shake of his head. Herscherik would often spend his free time discussing what he'd read with the librarian, but today, free time was in short supply. "Mister Shiro, is there anything you would be interested in?"

Shiro almost protested the unwanted nickname, but shook his head in resignation. "Something about magic, I suppose..."

"Magic... Should be over here." Herscherik climbed up the stairs. He recalled that the books on magic were shelved in the middle level.

Once shown to the correct section, Shiro picked up a book with curiosity and began skimming the text. Herscherik hesitated to speak to his guest. *He* didn't enjoy having his reading interrupted, after all.

Hoenir said he only has eyes for magic. I guess Shiro's a Spellcaster. Herscherik watched his guest carefully, as he remained focused on his book. Just as he'd first noticed, Shiro was thin and frail-looking for a man. His hand that poked out from beneath his sleeve, adorned by multiple bracelets, looked as thin as a twig. Herscherik, too, had the problem of remaining small, frail, and weak despite his daily training. *I'd love to get taller, and I'd want some muscles, even if it's not as much as Oran or Kuro.* While Oran had a more slender build than the other knights, he was secretly kind of ripped, with a six pack and everything. Kuro, too, was fully equipped with rigorously trained muscles that were geared more towards flexibility, compared to Oran's power.

But where did that leave Herscherik? Giving Shiro a quick glance as he kept his nose between the pages, Herscherik rolled up his sleeve to reveal a frail, bony stick of a wrist. The prince sighed. *This is too thin, isn't it?* While he didn't really

have any frame of reference since he rarely saw other children his age, he couldn't help but think that he was much skinnier than he remembered Ryoko being as a child. Despite holding on to a glimmer of hope that children might just mature at a different rate in this fantasy world, Herscherik knew that it was ultimately nothing but a pipe dream. His brothers were all taller and better built than the average Japanese man, after all. Herscherik sighed, hoping again that he'd end up at least in the ordinary category.

“Prince Herscherik?”

Hearing his name out of the blue, Herscherik's head snapped up. Any member of the royal family, no matter who, served as the face of the nation. He couldn't be caught looking woeful or sighing to himself. That could come back to bite him some day. But Herscherik saw he needn't concern himself with that upon realizing who had called his name. “Mister Sigel, hello!”

The man addressed by that name answered with a little nod. He was lanky and tall, with light-blue hair and indigo eyes behind a pair of spectacles. He looked more like a student than a seasoned scholar. Herscherik had first met him through Marx during the drug trafficking incident; Sigel worked for the department of Research and was Marx's Spellcaster of service. Most importantly, he was a serious magic nerd. In his own words, he took Marx's job offer because “you can't beat a job with three meals and a cot, a lenient boss, and an all-access pass to any lab.”

Herscherik had heard that, naturally, Sigel was quite adept with magic, too. Not that Herscherik had ever seen Sigel actually cast a spell. He was more inclined towards magical items than spells themselves. In fact, he had devoted his life to the study of them. His biggest interest was magical items used in ancient times—Sigel lived and breathed his research into ingenious artifacts lost to history. As a bona-fide nerd, he showed little interest in anything else, although he was socially adept enough to take notice of and hold conversations with people he considered friends, like Marx and Herscherik.

“Looking for a book?” Herscherik asked.

“Yes. There's something on my mind, and I didn't have any resources in my room.” Sigel gave his answer and turned to the bookshelf nearby. He looked

through a few rows of titles before his gaze came to a halt. It had landed on Shiro, who was still engrossed in his book. “Who may this Spellcaster be?”

“You can tell that Mister Shiro’s a Spellcaster?”

“Of course. Who else would carry magical items of that caliber?”

“Magical items? Well, he’s...”

Sigel didn’t give Herscherik a chance to introduce Shiro. “Doesn’t matter who. Hey, you!”

“Huh?” Shiro growled, having had his reading interrupted. If this had been a cartoon, Shiro would have had about three jets of steam coming off his face. When Herscherik had mistaken him for a woman, he’d imagined about five stacks. Herscherik slumped his shoulders, his belief in the correlation of external beauty and severity of temper reaffirmed.

“Show me those magical bracelets!” Sigel pointed right at the jewelry on Shiro’s wrist. “And your earrings and necklaces, too!” What had seemed like mere fashion accessories to Herscherik were apparently magical items. “Did you come up with this formula? Very unorthodox... I see, you shorten activation here... but don’t you spend excessive Magic this way?” Sigel, close enough to easily embrace Shiro, was practically boring a hole into the bracelet with his eyes.

The bracelet in question was made of gold, with a ruby-like gem fitted onto it. Upon closer inspection, Herscherik noticed that there was an incantation carved into the bracelet and stone. More accurately, it was a magical formula that comprised a spell. It was all a little hard to grasp for Herscherik, who had no Magic of his own.

“No... This one’s for emergencies only, specialized for shortening activation time. This one is for magical efficiency.” Shiro took off another bracelet and showed it to Sigel. This one was silver with a blue gem, in contrast to the first one.

“Hm... I see. So you keep it loaded with Magic as a sort of reservoir. It looks like your earrings have a formula to lessen the amount required for casting, too. Wouldn’t it be more efficient if you tweaked the formula a bit here?”

“Thought about it. Doing that interferes with this other effect, and...”

“I see. That’s tough to balance.”

The pair heatedly debated, bracelets and earrings in hand, reminiscent of two nerds crossing paths in a hobby shop.

“Hello...?” Herscherik quietly interrupted the pair engaged in fiery discussion of magical formulas. At this rate, they looked like they would keep arguing into the wee hours of the night. More importantly, Herscherik was feeling left out. *Why do I feel like the third wheel?!* Herscherik had studied magic, but had only covered the basics since he lacked any Magic Within himself. Since Herscherik couldn’t put any spells to practice, both him and his tutor had given up on that avenue.

“Excuse me, Your Highness. I seem to have been carried away by these rare and potent magical items.” Sigel’s ostentatious apology drew a chuckle out of Herscherik. There was no ‘seeming’ about Sigel being carried away, but Herscherik didn’t remark on that! Sigel lit up with a new idea and turned to Shiro. “I just thought of a good formula thanks to you. I’ve got to get back to the lab! That reminds me—we should be testing new magical items in the field today. Why don’t you come by to watch? Oh, there’s so much to do! Excuse me, Your Highness!” Sigel rambled on, only to leave in a hurry. By the time Herscherik realized that Sigel had left empty-handed despite coming to the library in search of a book, the Spellcaster was already out of the building.

“I’m a little jealous...” Herscherik muttered, after recovering from Sigel’s swift exit.

“Jealous?”

Herscherik looked up at Shiro and his curious expression, and covered his mouth with his hand. It was too late to take it back. “I have no talent for magic,” Herscherik chuckled. “So I’m jealous of you and Mister Sigel.” That much was an irrefutable fact, predetermined since his birth in this world. Weak build and no Magic Within. Herscherik knew there was no way for him to improve either aspect of himself. Despite that, he had ambitions and people who followed him.

Then, Herscherik saw that Shiro was looking at him with a mix of pity and sympathy. “Mister Shiro, if you’re interested in that experiment... should we

head over?” Herscherik suggested with deliberate cheerfulness to disperse the awkward atmosphere. Now that he thought of it, he’d heard from the triplets that there was going to be a special experiment on the test field, and now he’d been given an invitation. Herscherik finally recalled his afternoon plans that he had forgotten in the face of his encounter with the Church and Shiro.

The test field was located next to the military training ground, and served a similar purpose for Spellcasters. The construction was warded on the inside and outside, making it impervious to any magical attack internal or external. This was the best-protected place in the castle when it came to magic.

As Herscherik and Shiro entered the building meant for Spellcasters, a voice called to them. “Herscherik, you came!”

“Hello, Reinette,” Herscherik bowed to his brother, who was running towards him with a wave.

When he reached Herscherik, Reinette patted his little brother’s head. “I know I invited you, but I’m still so glad you came. I’ll call the other two over—give me a second.”

Call the other two over? Herscherik looked around, figuring that the people Reinette was talking about, or at least someone who could relay the message to them, had to be nearby.

However, there seemed to be no one else around.

As Herscherik wondered what his brother meant, the other two appeared before even a minute had passed.

“It really is Herscherik... I didn’t think you’d be interested, since you suck at magic!”

“Cecily... I think you should brush up on your social skills.”

Herscherik was wounded by his sister’s blunt comment, especially since he had just been reminded of that depressing fact earlier. *I know this feeling. Oh, how deadly a child’s innocence can be...* In the midst of this mental assault, Herscherik decided to voice the question on his mind. “How did you call them here, anyway?”

“Oh, you don’t know about us, Herscherik?” Reinette clapped his hands at the realization.

Cecily and Arya finished the thought for him:

“We have a special triplet power. Something different than magic.”

“Telepathy! We can talk to each other with our minds, and we know each other’s general location all the time.”

Telepathy? So that’s how they gathered so quickly at the party. Herscherik had known from his readings that such sixth-sense powers existed in this world. Since these powers were sometimes thought to exist even in his previous world, he didn’t find it particularly surprising that they were real in a universe rife with magic.

“And, we’re testing a new magical item based on that power.”

“Based on your power? And, was the academy in session today...?” Now that they mentioned it, Herscherik realized it was a weekday, and the triplets, despite being royalty, were indeed students. While Herscherik assumed that this experiment was a big deal, he wondered if it outweighed all three of them skipping out on class.

Cecily answered his curiosity. “We’re testing a magical item where three people assist in casting one single spell. I think we’d have a better success rate than normal, don’t you?”

“The goal is to apply it to any group of three Spellcasters, since splitting the Magic cost of a difficult spell between three people would make it much easier to cast. Not to mention that it would lessen the strain on each Spellcaster, and it might just boost the effect of the spell too. Since it’s based on our powers, we have to help test it,” Arya explained. He seemed more talkative than usual.

Even as Herscherik nodded along, he couldn’t quite grasp the full significance of this research. *So it’s like a twincast skill from an RPG?* Some video games Ryoko played had included powerful spells that required multiple characters to cast, and Herscherik was left with the impression that this must have been a more difficult feat in this world than he might have believed.

“I doubt any of that is possible,” Shiro grumbled, refusing to meet anyone’s

eye.

“Herscherik, who’s the pretty lady?”

“Oh, no. He’s actually a man!” Herscherik rushed to correct Cecily. While it might have been too late, Herscherik didn’t want Shiro to react the same way he had earlier, since he doubted that the rest of his royal family would be quite as forgiving. *I don’t think Mark would care, though*, Herscherik thought, judging by how his brother interacted with Oran and Sigel.

Meanwhile, Shiro simply scoffed and added, “There has always been research into the idea of multiple Spellcasters casting one spell together, and it’s believed to be *theoretically* possible. But every attempt has ended in failure, because of the difficulty involved in harmonizing the nature of both participants’ Magic Within. Two Spellcasters would have been achievement enough, but three?”

The triplets frowned at Shiro’s scoffing, and the air grew tense. Herscherik, now stuck in the crossfire again, was left to fret. *What’s happening...? Shiro really does get talkative when it comes to magic, just like he did when talking to Sigel. But what does it mean to ‘harmonize the nature’ of magic?* He could understand that it wasn’t as easy as everyone just using the same incantation, but not much more than that due to his lack of fundamental knowledge.

The triplets seemed to understand, though, as Arya took a step forward. “I see what you’re getting at. Even though us triplets have very similar Magic and telepathy, our chance of success is probably low. It will be difficult for Spellcasters to adjust their Magic on their own. But, if each person minutely adjusts their own Magic with a magical item, it’s not impossible.” Arya responded directly to Shiro, much to Herscherik’s surprise. He had always seemed like the least confrontational triplet. It showed how deeply the three siblings were involved in the process.

“That adjustment is easier said than done. The amount of calculation it would require...”

“But that’s...”

The two launched into a heated debate right where they stood. Herscherik felt a strange sense of déjà vu and was about to intervene when he felt a tug on

his arm. He looked up to find Reinette and Cecily standing behind him with resigned expressions.

“No one can stop Arya now. Don’t bother trying.”

“Arya doesn’t compromise when it comes to magical theory.”

Herscherik looked to and fro between the pair locked in an argument and the pair looking on in resigned spectatorship. “But what about the experiment?”

Just as he posed his question, another voice interrupted them. “Princess Cecily, Prince Arya, Prince Reinette. May we begin...?” The voice belonged to an old man with white hair and a full beard who seemed rather short, either by birth or old age. His face was so wrinkled that it was hard to tell if his eyes were open at all. “A pleasure to meet Your Highness, Prince Herscherik. My name is Brad, and I lead the Magical Theory Research Laboratory. Is this Your Highness’ first time in the test field?”

That’s right—it’s my first time, Herscherik thought, teary-eyed. He couldn’t help it. As someone who couldn’t use magic, he usually had no business being here. The innocent comment rubbed salt in the wound that the triplets had unintentionally re-opened.

Oh, wait—but isn’t this classified stuff? Maybe Shiro shouldn’t be here... Herscherik wondered if an outsider should have been so casually invited to this experiment, even if he was a member of the Church who was supposed to be politically neutral. Despite Sigel’s invitation, Herscherik wondered if he shouldn’t have confirmed it with someone higher up first. That was just basic business practice, after all. “Excuse me, Lord Brad. I brought a guest with me upon Mister Sigel’s request. Would that be a problem?”

“We don’t normally allow any guests...” Brad said, looking Shiro up and down. “But I see that this one was invited here by that peculiar fellow Sigel, and is proficient enough in magical theory to hold his own in a debate with Prince Arya. In fact, I would request his presence and opinion on the experiment myself.”

“Are you sure?” Herscherik asked, to confirm.

Elder Brad widened his eyes ever so slightly and lifted his lips into a smile.

“We are truth-seekers. A successful inquiry requires numerous failures, as well as honest input and willingness to accept it.”

“Thank you!” Herscherik said, and the old man laughed like Santa Claus.

“It is dangerous, though, so stay out of the test field, if you please. I must insist that Your Highness, as well as our guest, remain outside of the barriers.”

Herscherik nodded in wholehearted compliance.

Herscherik and Shiro watched as the test field was prepared for the experiment. The area consisted of an open courtyard platform surrounded by a solid stone building. Herscherik looked at the platform, recalling how Reinette had told him that the building was protected with two magical barriers, and the platform was protected by three for protection from any demonstrations and experimentation on magic.

The triplets were discussing things with the Spellcasters in the middle of the platform. They all seemed quite professional as they passionately discussed the upcoming experiment. *I wonder if I could have helped, if I only had a little bit of Magic...* While Herscherik didn’t consider himself useless, exactly, he couldn’t help but feel a little down about it. If he’d possessed some physical strength, he could save more people. If he had even a little bit of Magic Within, he could learn more and innovate. He never wallowed in self-pity, but... Still, he couldn’t help but wonder what he could accomplish with a little more power... especially when he saw how talented his siblings and men of service were. “Sense of inferiority, I guess,” he muttered.

“What did you say?” Shiro asked.

“Nothing,” Herscherik smiled. He seemed to be in a sentimental rut today. *I never really felt like this before, I guess.*

Ryoko had rarely felt a sense of inferiority. When it came to marriage, for example, she only felt happiness for her younger coworkers and sisters who had gotten married while she remained single. Even when some of her male coworkers who started later than her were promoted above her position, she didn’t think anything of it. Ryoko had a very well-defined life that contained the few things that really mattered to her. She didn’t want for much, nor did she need much.

But now, Herscherik had so many more things that mattered to him. He wanted more, needed more, and longed for more. *I've become so much greedier since I've been in this world*, Herscherik realized. Perhaps his sense of inferiority was merely the unfamiliar feeling of an indication of longing for something he didn't have. That made it seem like it might not be such a negative emotion after all.

"By the way, Mister Shiro..." Herscherik turned to the man, seeing that the setup for the experiment would still take a while. If he didn't understand something, he only had to ask. "Why is it difficult for multiple Spellcasters to cast together?" Herscherik saw that Shiro's eyes flashed with a look of surprise, as if Herscherik was lacking some universal knowledge. Not that he was bothered by that—not asking might have left him embarrassed for the rest of his life.

"The nature of each person's Magic Within varies. It's difficult to match different Magic while casting a spell."

"Nature? Match?"

Shiro continued. "Think of Magic like water. Some water tastes sweet, some bitter, and some has no taste at all. Those differences affect the activation and effect of spells. You don't want bitter water if you're mixing a sweet drink, do you?"

When he put it that way, Herscherik understood—it was difficult to converge individually varying Magic, but his siblings could mitigate the differences in their Magic because of their similar birth and their powers of telepathy, raising their success rate in this particular experiment. "Thank you," he said. "You're a great teacher, Mister Shiro... Oh, I think they're starting." He looked back at the platform and, seeing that the triplets were waving at him, returned a wave of his own. Behind Herscherik's back, Shiro looked like he wanted to say something.

The first experiment involved a wind spell. The triplets lined up and began their incantation, each with a wand-like magical item in hand. Then, a band of light depicting the incantation shimmered into existence—small at first, before expanding and surrounding the triplets.

After a moment, a whirlwind roughly twice as tall as a grown man materialized in front of the siblings as they concentrated. Staying focused, they maintained the spell for a while before both the band of light and whirlwind dissipated.

A cheer erupted from the Spellcasters in the audiences. This apparently constituted a success, as the triplets reported their results to the researchers before taking up another set of items and trying different incantations.

They went on to perform the same task with different elements. Unless literally nothing happened, Herscherik couldn't tell the difference between a successful cast and a failure. However, he was able to get a vague sense of what was going on from listening to Shiro mutter about the results of each attempt.

Eventually, the triplets seemed to have completed their tasks. A trio of ordinary Spellcasters took over to try the same spells over again, to no avail as Shiro had predicted. As disappointment began to hang heavy in the air, the Spellcasters continued to repeat the experiment.

And then, something strange began to happen.

"Doesn't that fire look... odd?" Even Herscherik could tell something was wrong. The fireball that had appeared before the three Spellcasters began to grow and shrink haphazardly before ballooning up to a size much bigger than any previous attempt had managed to produce.

But that wasn't all. Someone rushed up to the Spellcasters on the field, yelling something at them. "Did it fail?" Just as Herscherik muttered this to himself, the Spellcasters all fell to the ground like marionettes with cut strings and the fireball (now more than three times the size of a person) shot straight towards Herscherik and Shiro like a loosed arrow.

Herscherik, even as he was surprised, didn't think to run. He had been told about the three-layer barrier between him and the experiment platform, after all. He was sure the fireball would dissipate as soon as it hit the first barrier. Everyone there was expecting the same result.

However, a sound like a pane of glass shattering echoed through the field. "What?" Herscherik said, out loud—and then another shattering noise tore through the air, as if to drown out Herscherik's voice. The roaring ball of flames

was bearing down on him. Feeling the scorching heat even through the final barrier, Herscherik instinctively covered his face with his arms. Even though he knew he had to get out of there as fast as possible, Herscherik remained motionless. He couldn't move, as if his feet were sewn to the ground. Even with his arm covering his eyes, he could feel the heat of the approaching fireball on his face.

An annoyed *tsk* came from beside him, and the heat disappeared as suddenly as it came. Herscherik peeked through his fingers to find a head of white hair and a long robe standing in the face of the heatwave. *Mister Shiro!* Herscherik reflexively reached out to grab Shiro's robe. Shiro paid him no mind as he stuck out his arm, his gold and silver bracelets clanging, and began an incantation to construct a magical formula.



Two beams of light, laced with incantations in varying shades of blue, manifested and danced around Shiro. At the same, Shiro's long white hair seemed to glow a clear sky blue as it fluttered in the air. The gems embedded in Shiro's bracelets and earring began to glow as well. With a bright flash, Shiro concluded his spell. The fireball had stopped, trapped in a prison of water that had materialized out of nowhere, like a precious jewel locked in a clear glass case.

With another incantation, Shiro waved his extended arm. With that gesture, both the water and the ball of fire within it disappeared, along with the belts of light that twined around him.

Now, there was only a trace of warm humidity and silence in the air. Everyone remained speechless, staring at Shiro, who paid no mind to any of them. He only took a deep breath.

There goes a few more... Shiro looked at his arm. The central gems on a few of his bracelets were cracked and the formula that had been embedded in the metal was nowhere to be seen. Shiro assumed that his earrings were in a similar state. More precise and powerful spells required more time and Magic to cast, and took a greater toll on the caster's body. In emergencies like this, Shiro used magical items to shorten the time required for his spells and made his Magic expenditure more efficient.

Despite all of this, he'd had to use up the pre-loaded Magic in his items, as well as his own Magic Within, to cast instantly. *Even that wasn't enough for such a complex spell—a water-elemental barrier.* Shiro looked at his own hair that had fallen onto his shoulder. The sky-blue glow was fading. His body had automatically gathered Floating Magic from the air around him, converting it into and multiplying his own Magic Within. The change in his hair was a clear sign of that. It reminded Shiro of his accursed past.

You monster! You're no son of mine! His father had spat at him. *If it wasn't for you... he wouldn't have changed! Stay away from me, you monster!* His mother had screamed. They had made it clear how they felt about the power Shiro had been born with, to convert Floating Magic and use it as though it was his own.

Shiro shook his head to banish his haunting memories.

Then, the Spellcasters around him began to talk.

“How did he conjure up that much Magic...? I can’t believe a fireball that size just *vanished*.”

“I’ve never seen a formula like that. Did you see his hair...?”

There was an unmistakable note of fear and apprehension in their surprised tone, opening old wounds on Shiro’s heart.

I hate people. I wish everyone would disappear. He’s the only one who... If it hadn’t been for the command of the only person who ever accepted him, Shiro would have never come here in the first place. Dark emotions began to rise up in Shiro; but just as he was about to sink lower into their grasp, he was pulled back out. Physically, too—his robe was being pulled from behind, with enough strength that it was beginning to choke him.

As he coughed in his tightening collar, Shiro recalled that the prince was behind him. *I don’t want him to cry...* Shiro particularly disliked children. They never held back their opinions nor masked their emotions. He remembered how the children in his neighborhood used to call him a monster and throw rocks at him when he was little. However, Shiro turned around to find the prince wearing an expression he had never expected to see.

“That was amazing! And gorgeous! How did you do that, Mister Shiro!?” With glittering eyes, Herscherik had forgotten all about his brush with death and held on tight to Shiro’s robe, as if he was keeping a treasured find in his grasp. His expression was one of utter amazement.

“Aren’t you...?” *Afraid of me?* Shiro wanted to add, but failed to vocalize it.

While Shiro was at a loss for words, Herscherik tilted his head. “What? Can you say that again? While you’re at it, can you use that magic again—?”

“Hersch!”

Herscherik turned around to find his men of service, who must have sprinted to the scene. The two were breathing heavily, like they were some sort of

weirdos on the street. Herscherik was a little taken aback by their demeanor, but didn't mention it. "Kuro? Oran? What's wrong?" Herscherik asked, having forgotten about what had just happened.

"Are you alright?! Are you hurt?!" Oran asked, as Kuro examined Herscherik from head to toe.

"Hurt? Not at all."

"Okay... Good. I was in the training grounds nearby, and I heard the barriers break. You told me you'd be in the test field, so I rushed over as fast as I could... I'm so glad you're all ri—"

"Who's in charge of this operation?" Kuro interrupted. "Weren't there any security measures in place?" Kuro rose to his feet, having made sure that Herscherik wasn't hurt. "You better answer carefully, because..." Kuro let out a guttural chuckle. While his tone seemed calm on the surface, the two who knew him best understood that Kuro was truly enraged.

"Woah, calm down, Black Dog. When you say stuff like that—"

"Shut up, Sir Delinquent. If something happens to Hersch, I'll end their whole bloodline..."

"Gahhhh! Shut up, you creepy butler! Stop saying things like that! If you go out there, you'll only make things worse! Let me take care of it! I'll look into the whole thing. Put those weapons away!" Oran rushed to hold back Kuro, who seemed ready to turn the whole field into a bloodbath.

Herscherik held his forehead. "Calm down, you two..." Herscherik sulked at the conversation playing out in front of him before he was swarmed by the triplets.

Meanwhile, Shiro watched Herscherik, with something visibly on his mind.

Shiro gazed out of the small window in the running carriage. While Gracis was relatively temperate, there was the occasional snowfall in the winter. The snow, which had been infrequent since the previous year, had laid out a white carpet all throughout the castle town. A child was running through it. A portly woman came into view, and the child ran to her—clearly she was the child's mother.

Shiro watched this scene as he passed by in the carriage. *I wonder how my mother is doing.* Shiro's last memory of his mother was her watching him being taken away, her cheeks sunken in and her eyes devoid of any light. A single teardrop had fallen out of her eye, but Shiro never knew why she had shed that tear. Even when he tried to remember more, it seemed almost like a thick fog had obscured his memory.

"Today was a big day. How was the prince?" Hoenir, who sat across from him, brought Shiro out of his reminiscence.

Shiro turned from the window to his adoptive father. Hoenir was the one who had saved him, in the end. "He was a strange one..." He had expected the prince to reprimand him for his attitude, but Herscherik had only let out a chuckle. Then, despite his royal status, he was quick to apologize. He expected the prince to flee in terror upon seeing a glimpse of his monstrous powers, but Herscherik looked at him as if he had just discovered something wonderful. He could still feel the tug on his robe.

"How interesting." Hoenir smiled. Shiro usually barely noticed, or even actively disliked, most people. "Now, you must continue to observe the prince. He may end up being the salvation of our world."

"I'm... not good with kids." Shiro frowned.

After the incident, Herscherik had met with Hoenir and explained what had happened, before apologizing for putting Shiro in harm's way. The fact that Herscherik struggled with magic came up, and Hoenir had offered Shiro's services as a tutor. Herscherik declined at first, but finally relented against Hoenir's polite but firm insistence.

"The prince seemed to take quite a liking to you. At the end of the day, I don't think you dislike him, either," Hoenir said. The fact that Shiro, who couldn't stand most people, didn't immediately reject the idea of being Herscherik's tutor was proof enough of that—although his face remained fixed in a scowl. If Shiro really didn't want to do something, he couldn't be convinced by any means, regardless of any royalty involved. He would reject a proposition he found distasteful with force, if he had to. Hoenir could easily predict that Shiro would agree to his request, albeit reluctantly.

“Understood... Master Hoenir.”

Hoenir smiled. “Thank you. And I’m counting on you... my dear Noel.”

Shiro, the outcast Spellcaster, returned his gaze to the window. Hoenir said nothing, knowing full well that this was how the young man masked his joy.

“From what I could find, the magical item had been swapped out.”

It was after ten o’clock in the evening. Clutching a cup of hot milk that Kuro had prepared, Herscherik was listening to Oran’s report on the recent incident. Coffee did exist in this world, and as Ryoko used to enjoy the stuff, Herscherik had requested the beverage—only to be refused by Kuro. Another tragic consequence of being stuck in a seven-year-old body.

Herscherik returned his attention to the issue of the magical item that had caused the whole incident earlier. “Swapped out?” *How?* Herscherik asked with his expression. The castle was defended with a magical barrier that encompassed the entire grounds. While the aging wards had a few cracks here and there, no ordinary intruder could have found them. Moreover, the artifact they’d used in the experiment was kept in the vaults of the Magical Theory Lab, one of the most strictly guarded locations in the entire castle. *Is there someone on the inside again?* Herscherik couldn’t imagine who that could have been. He shook his head and continued to listen to Oran.

“The item that replaced the original had its formula altered to remove all restrictions on it. Anyone interacting with the item in that state would have had their Magic siphoned out,” Oran added. The three Spellcasters had their Magic Within drained to their limits, and were still unconscious as they spoke. “There may be permanent damage, in some way,” Oran said with a painful expression. “Sigel’s looking into it more deeply. I’ve never seen him that angry.”

Herscherik imagined Sigel, his eyes wide and red with rage. The man was infatuated with—or rather, obsessed with—any kind of magical equipment. His wrath would surely fuel his quest to uncover how his precious artifacts had been tampered with. *I’ll leave Mister Sigel to investigate the items, but...* “I don’t know how they swapped them out, but it’s very likely that it was pulled off by the Church or the minister’s faction. After today, there’s no doubt that

the Church is on the move,” Herscherik said.

Hoenir had pushed for Shiro to become his tutor in magic. Herscherik assumed that this was their latest move. *But apparently he doesn't know that I have no Magic Within at all.* There were very few who did, outside of his immediate family. As far as the public was concerned, Herscherik was simply less talented than usual in the craft. Hoenir didn't know—or perhaps he did, and had recommended Shiro as a tutor anyway. “Kuro, look into what the Church is doing, please. Take note of any detail, no matter how insignificant it seems.”

“Got it.” Kuro left the room.

“Oran, can you report to Mark about what happened today? About William and Eutel, too. Tell him to watch his back. Oh, and that we'll be borrowing Sigel for a while.”

“Understood, but that will be done tomorrow. After what happened today, I'm not letting you out of my sight, Hersch.”

“Fine...”

“Don't look so unhappy about it.”

I really feel fine, but after what happened... The “accident” had been set up within the castle grounds, where Herscherik had always felt safe. It was only thanks to Shiro's intervention that he had remained unhurt. After leaving the test field, Herscherik had finally gotten over his excitement and thanked the man properly. Shiro had returned an expression of mixed emotions, like something was stuck in the back of his throat.

If the Church is trying to kill me, it seems contradictory that I'd be saved by Shiro, an ally of the Church. But does that clear them completely...? Even though it felt like the accident was directed at him, Herscherik knew that he would have most likely never attended the experiment at all if it wasn't for Sigel's invitation. It was chilling to think that even that friendly suggestion might have been part of someone's darker plan. *Am I overthinking this...? No, it's too dangerous to act on assumptions. Besides, there's one more thing I have to take care of.*

The day of his meeting with Barbosse's daughter was fast approaching. Herscherik slowly sipped on his cup of hot milk. The hint of herbs and the subtle sweetness of honey seemed to calm his nerves. *Let's see if fortune really does favor the bold... Failure isn't an option.* Herscherik finished his milk with a twinge of anxiety.

Chapter Four: The Prince, the Sisters, and the Tea Party

In the royal quarters, a pair of sisters was shown to a room where the royal family met with formal guests, filled with well-made furniture. The two of them sat on the exquisitely comfortable sofa to graciously await their host. They were the daughters of the Marquis Barbosse, the most powerful man in Gracis. The younger was Violetta, a girl with curly sienna hair who would be turning seven this year. With a pair of big, vibrant, hazel eyes, a well-defined nose, and lips the color of light cranberry, her beauty was irrefutable.

“I want to go home,” the picturesque girl whined, puffing out her cheeks and dangling her feet off of the edge of the couch, which made the skirt of her dress ripple out in waves.

Her older sister, Jeanne, considered it a privilege of her sister’s that even childish complaining came across as adorable. Jeanne had the same hazel eyes as Violetta, but a set of straight copper hair that shone like a freshly minted coin. She was seventeen, which made her a little too old to still be called a girl, but still a little too young to earn the title of a lady. Unlike her sister, Jeanne gave off a reserved impression. She was often described as “pleasant” or “tidy,” but she didn’t consider those to be compliments when she was dressed to the nines. “Stop that, Vivi. It’s unladylike. Besides, this is Father’s decision.”

Despite Jeanne’s reprimand, Violetta only puffed her cheeks out more. “No! The youngest prince is just a baby! I want to marry Prince Marx!”

You’re still a baby, too, Vivi... Jeanne sighed, as her sister turned the other way. Violetta had recently entered a rebellious, can’t-wait-to-grow-up phase—which made her a handful when she wasn’t perfectly content. Jeanne could deal with her attitude because they were sisters, but she couldn’t let Violetta act the same way to strangers.

Prince Marx, huh? The royal prince of Gracis was known as the Royal Rose to everyone but himself. Jeanne had seen the Rose at a soirée or two, and had

confirmed that his appearance lived up to his name. Moreover, the recent capital gossip was rife with rumors that the Rose Prince had grown even handsomer of late—all because he had finally gotten himself a girlfriend. While it was a common belief that women became more beautiful when they fell in love, Jeanne didn't know if the same applied to men.

In any case, right now it was her responsibility to keep her little sister under control. “Be that as it may... We're noble women, aren't we? You knew this was going to happen eventually.”

Violetta only huffed, making no other complaints out loud. Despite her whining, she knew full-well that only a small fraction of those born into nobility were lucky enough to choose whom they married. In fact, most women would envy her for marrying a prince, albeit the youngest and ultimately least influential one. Besides, her sister was the only person Violetta couldn't argue with for long. Jeanne's lost and teary-eyed expression always broke her rebellious spirit. “Then, will you sing to me until the prince arrives? The song from before?” Violetta gazed up at her sister, her head tilted in a perfectly adorable manner that seemed almost calculated.

Jeanne hesitated. “I haven't finished the words yet.” Jeanne had finally composed the requested song over a matter of years. The lyrics were another story. Jeanne had attempted to make her sister give up on the idea, to no avail.

Violetta kept gazing up at her sister. “That's the song I want to hear. Please?”

“Oh, all right...” Jeanne chuckled. She looked around, confirming that they were alone in the room. Then, she began to hum. While the lack of lyrics made the song seem still incomplete, Violetta happily swayed to the tune. Watching her sister, Jeanne smiled.

Come to think of it, her younger sister was the one who ever listened to her music. It just wasn't acceptable for a noble girl to play bard. She had composed this particular song with the slow transition from winter to spring in mind. She wanted it to warm people's hearts, like the early spring sun. After a moment, Jeanne began to enjoy herself, and the humming grew more and more passionate.

“That's such a wonderful song.”

The sudden intrusion caused Jeanne to stop her humming in surprise, and she turned towards the source of the voice to find a boy and a young man. The boy had light-blond hair that reminded Jeanne of the spring sunshine she'd imagined when composing the song. Combined with his emerald eyes, it gave the handsome boy a gentle expression.

Immediately recognizing him, Jeanne rushed up from the sofa and gave a deep curtsy. "Forgive me, Your Highness!" She had been so caught up in humming her song that she hadn't even noticed the prince's entrance—a mistake that a young noble lady could not afford to make. She turned to her sister to find her still seated at the sofa, looking in the other direction. "Violetta!" Jeanne scolded her sister in a hushed voice, but Violetta's attitude did not improve. In fact, her temporary happiness had completely crumbled now that her sister's humming had been interrupted. She could have been rightfully accused of disrespecting royalty.

In contrast to Jeanne, whose face was fast draining of color, Herscherik did not reprimand Violetta. "Please, make yourself comfortable," he said to Jeanne. "I'm not one for too much formality. I'm sorry to have surprised you." The prince smiled apologetically. "Nice to meet you. I'm Herscherik Gracis and this is Octavian, my knight of service." The young man clad in a white knight's uniform, who stood next to Herscherik, gave a silent bow of his head.

Jeanne didn't need the introduction—she could tell that this was the prince's knight of service from the sword on his belt. Jeanne also knew that the prince addressed his knight by the nickname Oránge, and that the knight was the third son of the former general Roland Aldis and he had shown incredible prowess in the games two years ago.

"My butler of service is with me, too, but I'm having him prepare tea at the moment. I'll introduce him later," Herscherik added with the same friendly smile on his face. Jeanne was entranced by the prince's demeanor that resembled a character straight out of a fairy story. Rumor had it that the youngest prince was reserved and unremarkable, but now she truly understood how untrustworthy rumors could be. She wondered what about this adorable, kind, and precocious prince people considered unremarkable. "May I ask your name?" Herscherik inquired with a tilt of his head.

“F-Forgive me!” Realizing that she hadn’t introduced herself yet at the prince’s comment, Jeanne’s cheeks turned bright red from embarrassment. She yanked the still-sulking Violetta up by the arm, pulling herself and her sister into a ladylike curtsy. “My name is Jeanne Barbosse. And she, for the consideration of Your Highness, is Violetta...”

“Violetta...”

Seeing that her sister didn’t even curtsy, Jeanne would have growled out loud if she could. Obviously her sister was just as bratty in the presence of royalty. Not that Jeanne was blameless in perpetuating her behavior. “Enough.”

“But...” Violetta scrunched her face up as she was brought nearly to tears by her sister’s reprimand. A mysterious tinge of guilt struck Jeanne, but she knew that she couldn’t back down now. Just as she opened her mouth to lay down the law upon her little sister’s head, a faint laugh came from the prince’s direction. Jeanne turned to find Herscherik trying to contain his amusement.

Noticing her gaze, Herscherik cleared his throat and formed a smile to regain his composure. “Miss Jeanne, don’t be too harsh on Violetta. She’s only a child,” the prince said with a great deal of conviction, despite being the same age as Jeanne’s little sister. Jeanne reluctantly nodded. “It should be time for tea,” Herscherik declared, showing the sisters to a separate room.

“Wow!” Violetta cheered at the sight that opened up before her. Herscherik had shown them to a greenhouse within the castle. The space was used, in part, to research rare flora, so the humidity in the room was controlled by a magical device. The walls were entirely made up of glass panels. The sisters were welcomed by a black-haired young man whom they assumed to be Herscherik’s butler of service, as well as the eye-pleasing tapestry of green leaves and vibrant flowers that surrounded an immaculately prepared tea service. The table also held pastries and chocolates, while multiple serving carts arranged around it held sponge cake, pound cake, and shortcake, as well as a few varieties of jellies, sandwiches, and fruit.

It’s true... Girls look much more cuter when they’re happy. Violetta had completely dropped her rebellious attitude for age-appropriate excitement and

a gleam in her eyes as they darted from one sweet dish to another. *In any case, I think Kuro's baking is improving by the day...*

Herscherik didn't expect anyone to believe that the treats were all baked by Kuro himself. The sweets were of beyond-professional caliber just in appearance—let alone taste. The cakes were not served in slices, but actual entire miniature cakes each decorated with chocolate roses, candy, or fondant animals. *Dangit, they're almost too pretty to eat. You know what, I want that chocolate for myself... No, snap out of it!* Herscherik hurriedly shook off the hypnotic effect that Kuro's sweets had on him. "This is Schwarz, my butler of service. He made all of the sweets, too." Herscherik said, prompting both sisters to give Kuro an incredulous look, although Violetta's eyes were half-lit with admiration as well as disbelief. "Please, take your seats," Herscherik offered. "Tea, please, Schwarz?"

"Right away, Your Highness."

Kuro began preparing the tea as Oran naturally guided Violetta to her seat.

Seeing this accomplished, Jeanne curtsied where she stood. "I ought to be going."

Shocked, Violetta leaped to her feet. "What do you mean?!" she cried, pouting like a kitten abandoned in the pouring rain.

Jeanne answered her with quiet consolation. "Violetta. You were the only one invited. I was only acting as your attendant in the meantime. Normally, a woman unrelated to the royal family—someone who's not a queen, princess, or someone betrothed to royalty—would not be allowed in the royal quarter."

Violetta shook her head and clung to Jeanne. "But you're my *sister*! Besides, I don't want to be engaged before you—"

"Vivi!" Jeanne covered her mouth, having reprimanded her sister too sharply and having called her by her nickname. Violetta's face twisted up, visibly on the verge of tears.

"You really love your sister, don't you, Violetta?" Herscherik interrupted, and Jeanne couldn't formulate a response while Violetta blushed—but she didn't deny it. "Miss Jeanne, won't you stay with Violetta and I? I'm sure she would

feel less nervous, and we have plenty of sweets. Please join us for tea.”

Faced with her sister’s pleading and the prince’s invitation, Jeanne had only one option. “Then... I will join you both, with pleasure. Thank you, Your Highness.”

Oran tactfully offered a seat to the now-compliant Jeanne; Kuro did the same to Violetta, who had gotten out of her chair. Herscherik was secretly impressed by how naturally they seemed to be acting.

Kuro poured tea into a porcelain cup and placed it in front of his master, followed by the *chocolat* cake. Of course, Herscherik hadn’t needed to say a word about his preferences. The prince tilted his head and looked up at Kuro, who had moved over to the sisters to ask them which of the sweets they wanted. Herscherik tilted his head again, but fought hard against the allure of his cake while his guests chose.

After plates of cake and tea were prepared for the ladies, Herscherik spoke. “Shall we begin?” Then, he went straight for his cake. Using his fork to cut off a small bite, a smile grew on Herscherik’s face as he savored the taste. It wasn’t too sweet, but not quite bitter. Just how he liked it. *Kuro did it again. Just how I like... Um? How I like it?* The cake wasn’t quite sweet enough to please an actual child. Herscherik looked at Kuro, concerned that there was a chance one of the sisters would choose this particular cake instead. There was another *chocolat* cake in the selection that was only slightly different in appearance.

Herscherik was wondering about that when his eyes met Kuro’s, and the butler grinned. *He knew exactly what I wanted! Hmph! Fine by me—it’s delicious!* Herscherik continued eating his cake as if to hide his slight embarrassment, watching the sisters all the while. Violetta was having the shortcake with fondant, while Jeanne had chosen the cheesecake soufflé. The sisters were not very similar by appearance, since Jeanne had more reserved features while Violetta’s were more expressive. But when each of them took a bite of their cake and let a smile spread across their faces, their demeanors were practically identical. Then, Herscherik’s eyes met Jeanne’s, who was busy devouring her cake. Her face blushed lightly, perhaps in embarrassment over how caught up she was in her dessert—which Herscherik found rather cute.

“Does Your Highness always pass the time like this?” Jeanne asked, as if to clear the air.

“Let’s see... Most of the time, I’ll be studying or training, actually.” He didn’t disclose the classified portion of his busy schedule that included sneaking out of the castle to help out in town or dealing with various problems outside of the capital.

“Oh my, Your Highness must be very studious,” Jeanne said.

Herscherik chuckled. “Studious, you say?”

A shadow flashed over Jeanne’s expression. “Forgive me, Your Highness. Have I misspoke in any way...?”

“Not at all, Miss Jeanne. I try my best, but I’m not very talented with the pen or the sword.”

“Is... that so?”

“Yes... Especially when compared to my brothers.” Herscherik spoke honestly, as he didn’t consider this anything worth hiding. In fact, he appreciated having something to talk about. “I’m worried that my tutors will give up on me any day now,” Herscherik jested. “I’ve recently started taking music lessons, which I’ve also had difficulty with... Oh, by the way, what song were you humming earlier?” Herscherik recalled the tune, which was unlike any song he had heard in this world. It was an unhurried ballad that reminded him of a song Ryoko used to like. It had made him feel so nostalgic that he’d lost himself in the tune for some time.

Jeanne let her eyes wander. “I’m terribly embarrassed, but... I composed it myself.”

“Really! It was marvelous. You must be very talented, Miss Jeanne.” Herscherik smiled. He was happy that he had come across a song that had reminded him of his feelings.

Jeanne turned her gaze to the floor in embarrassment.

“Your Highness!” Violetta slammed the table and stood.

Herscherik turned to the startling sound to find two cleared plates and a half-

eaten jelly in front of her. *I'm glad she likes Kuro's dessert. What girl wouldn't, though?* He then looked at Violetta to see that she looked angry, for some reason.

"How can you put yourself down like that, Your Highness?!"

"What?" Herscherik froze, wide-eyed, at Violetta's accusation and her sharpened hazel eyes.

"The royal family must be a model for everybody to follow, like Prince Marx is!"

Herscherik blinked twice or thrice. "What about Brother Marx?"

"Prince Marx is proud, and princely, and perfect... His Highness is a master of sword and magic... And here is Your Highness, his brother, talking about himself so meekly!" Violetta continued to be outraged, praising Marx and putting Herscherik down.

Herscherik only watched her in confusion. *Marx is a very admirable person...* Herscherik looked up to his good-looking, talented, and good-natured brother, but he didn't understand why she was talking about his brother at all right now.

How can you put yourself down like that?! Mulling over Violetta's comment, Herscherik realized it must be a particular habit of his. *I was maybe a little too humble.* Humility was considered a virtue in Japan, and Ryoko was no exception. She tended to undervalue herself, especially out loud. In fact, Herscherik's men of service had each criticized him on multiple occasions, admonishing him not to be too dismissive of himself.

But it's all true, Herscherik thought. *I really don't have any talents.* Besides, he thought it was better to undervalue than overvalue himself. If he made a habit of planning with the worst case scenario in mind and low-balling his personal contributions, he had a much better chance of mitigating losses when things went sideways.

However, Herscherik understood that Violetta wasn't really trying to break him of his humility. *Is she jealous of me over her sister?* To support his assessment, he saw that Violetta kept glancing at her sister as she raged. *I guess she felt left out that her sister and I were striking up a conversation.* Was her

tantrum frustrating? *Maybe just a little*, Herscherik admitted, but Violetta was also right. Besides, he found it a little bit cute that she was trying so desperately to regain her sister's attention. *It wouldn't be very mature of me to get mad over a child's tantrum.*

To Herscherik, who had lived a life over thirty years long before his current one, Jeanne and Violetta were both children. Jeanne repeatedly reprimanded Violetta in a hushed voice, but her little sister showed no sign of slowing down. *I'm sure she'll stop when she gets tired*, Herscherik figured. *Maybe I'll offer her some more sweets when she does.* He decided to play the waiting game until then and reached for his cup.

Just as he took a sip, he froze. He had noticed Kuro, who had been wearing an immaculate butler's smile until this point, staring at Violetta with a deadpan expression. Kuro's seriousness wiped away the warmth growing in Herscherik's heart, sending a cold shiver down his spine. *Do you know how scary your deadpan is, Kuro?!*

Herscherik immediately shot Oran a quick glance. Oran returned a knowing nod and moved to a spot where he could stop Kuro if worse came to worst and he did something rash.

Fortunately for Herscherik, things never came to that.

A light *slap* rang through the room. "Stop it, Vivi."

Violetta, holding her cheek in astonishment, looked up at Jeanne to see that her usually mild-manner sister was seriously angry. "B-But..." Violetta began, teary-eyed.

"You must be so perfect, Vivi, if you can afford to criticize someone else like that!"

Violetta fell silent, and not a sound was heard in the greenhouse.

Herscherik was the one to break that silence. "Miss Jeanne. This is my fault in any case. Please don't be too harsh with her." It all started when he turned the conversation towards his own lack of talent as he searched for something to talk about. He should have considered a topic that Violetta would prefer.

"But..." Jeanne stammered apologetically, as Violetta stared at him with her

hand still on her cheek.

Herscherik smiled in an attempt to clear the awkwardness. “I know. I heard that you’re an excellent dancer, Violetta. I was actually hoping you could help me learn.”

No one opposed Herscherik’s proposition. Anything was better than continuing to bear the silent greenhouse.

The group moved to a nearby ballroom, where the New Year’s party had been held. While the room had been packed with attendees then, it was now vast and empty.

Herscherik usually took dance lessons in a music room reserved for royalty, but even he couldn’t take his guests there without permission. Once in the ballroom, Kuro lifted the top of the grand piano there, preparing it to be used.

“Do you play the piano, Miss Jeanne?” Herscherik asked.

“I dabble from time to time...”

Herscherik requested that she play a well-known etude. Seeing that Jeanne had accepted the request and sat down at the piano, he turned to Violetta. She was avoiding his gaze, embarrassed, and twirling the hem of her dress. Herscherik felt that she probably understood how she’d overstepped, but didn’t know how to apologize for it. He approached her, kneeling down before holding out a hand. “May I have this dance with you, Lady Violetta?”

Violetta hesitated for a moment before putting her hand into Herscherik’s.

After the pair moved to the center of the ballroom, Jeanne began playing. The requested song was a leisurely one, which allowed the young pair to dance at a slower pace. The pair of silhouettes twirled before the small audience in the great ballroom.

“You’re a good dancer,” Violetta said, when they were about halfway through the song.

“Thank you.” Herscherik’s smile never wavered, but he was secretly relieved. He had a dance tutor, too, but he was apparently also lacking in that department compared to his siblings. After continuing his training despite this,

Herscherik's dancing wouldn't have embarrassed the average noble.

Perseverance is strength. Violetta's compliment alone was worth all that effort.

"I'm sorry about what I said," Violetta whispered, visibly full of remorse.

Marx, the royal prince, was a bona fide prince that everyone loved. The ladies of high society all adored him, he had graduated the academy with impeccable grades, and he served the country in the National Defense department. He even took on his father's duties during some events; in general he was the most recognizable figure in the country after the king. Violetta had always sighed in amazement upon seeing the Royal Rose at parties. She'd always thought that the word 'princely' was meant for people like him.

But now, she was face to face with a real live prince with golden hair who was kindly smiling at her. *Prince Herscherik isn't meek.* She was sure of that as soon as she took Herscherik's hand, which was riddled with hardened calluses—a testament to his hard work. One of those callouses was on the side of his middle finger, indicating the amount of hours he had spent holding a pen. Moreover, this prince had intervened when she was being scolded by her sister for putting *him* down. How could she have insulted such a kind, hard-working person by comparing him to his brother? Violetta was mortified by her own shallowness.

"Don't worry about me. My men of service nag me about it, too," Herscherik said, as they continued their dance.

"Nag?"

"Yes, they say that I sell myself too short. I think everyone's overestimating me, though." Herscherik chuckled. "Miss Jeanne isn't mad anymore, either."

"But..." Violetta nervously stole a glance at Jeanne, who continued to play the piano. Their eyes happened to meet, and Violetta hurriedly looked away. "She hates me now..." *Of course she would,* Violetta thought. *Who wouldn't hate a sister who's so mean?* Tears welled in her large, hazel eyes at the thought of her sister being so disappointed in her.

Herscherik purposefully tugged her close and twirled her around. Taking the lead like that, contrasting with his careful dancing until this point, had subsided her tears. "You're too cute to cry," Herscherik gave a sublime smile. "You really

love your sister, don't you, Violetta?"

"Yes... She is my favorite person in the world. She's always been by my side since our mother went to the Garden Above." Their mother had passed when Violetta was only two years old. While she still had a father and two brothers, Jeanne was the one who filled the void their mother had left.

"I see... I'm sorry I took up all of Miss Jeanne's attention earlier. But don't worry, she's not mad anymore. Look—she's just worried about you."

Embarrassed that her juvenile concerns were more transparent than she thought, Violetta glanced over Herscherik's shoulder at her sister to find her looking back at them with a concerned expression. *His Highness is right!* Violetta turned her gaze back to Herscherik, excited. His gentle eyes met hers. She could feel her cheeks redden as she stared into his emerald eyes.

Quickly, she averted her gaze and asked, "Wh-What is your mother like, Your Highness?" Violetta didn't remember anything about her mother. Anytime she asked her sister or the servants, she was never given a straight answer. Violetta wanted more than anything to know what it was like to have a mother. Herscherik's response, however, was not what she had hoped to hear.

"I have never met my Mother."

Violetta's eyes widened. "What?"

Herscherik chuckled. "She left for the Garden Above when I was born."

"I... didn't know." Violetta didn't know what else to say after discovering this similarity between them.

"I have seen paintings of her, though. She had the same blonde hair as me, and I hear that she was liked by everyone in the castle." Herscherik smiled at Violetta, whose expression had sunk.

"Is Your Highness not... lonely?" Violetta managed. At least she had her sister. While she'd sometimes wished she still had a mother, Violetta rarely felt truly lonely.

"Well..." Herscherik answered, as they kept dancing. "I had a nanny when I was younger. I can't see my father often since he's so busy, but he takes good

care of me. So do my brothers and sisters, and the queens. Besides, I have men of service with me now. So, no, I'm not lonely."

Not to mention my past life, Herscherik silently added. He missed Ryoko's life, and while Herscherik was grateful that his mother had given birth to him, he never felt alone. What's more, he had a firm purpose. *I guess I'm pretty dry about these things*, Herscherik chuckled. To Violetta, it came across as a lonely smile. "I am very lucky." Herscherik meant it sincerely, but Violetta took it as nothing more than bravado.

After watching the sisters make up and leave the ballroom, Herscherik had returned to his room to review the day's events with his men of service. More accurately, he was being scolded by them as he sat up straight on the sofa.

"So, Hersch. Remember the *original* plan?"

Herscherik waited a long beat before answering. "Yes, sir..." The original plan, of course, was the whole 'have *her* turn down the engagement' plan.

"But for some reason, you set up a second date," Oran said, giving an exasperated look next to Kuro.

"Well... They didn't seem like bad kids," Herscherik attempted a retort as he averted their eyes. Herscherik was never the type to do anything mean to other people. In fact, he loathed anything manipulative. If Violetta and Jeanne had acted haughty and cruel, Herscherik could have easily come up with a few ways to ensure that they weren't charmed by him.

But, as it turns out, they were just normal girls. At first, he thought that Violetta—his potential fiancée—was the kind of holier-than-thou aristocrat, but once they started talking, it was clear to see that she was just a regular girl her age who loved her sister. Jeanne, too, was a reserved but wise and understanding young woman.

I thought it might have been an act, Herscherik recalled, *but I don't believe that now... Still, something's off about Miss Jeanne*. Violetta seemed too young and impulsive to pull off deceiving anybody. However, Herscherik had a gut feeling that something was not right with Jeanne. For one, it was extremely strange that her younger sister was getting betrothed before her.

Miss Jeanne's old enough to marry Mark. He doesn't have a fiancée yet. If it's power Barbosse is after, wouldn't it make more sense to go after him? Jeanne might not qualify for royal queen, but as a prince's wife she would at least expect to be a queen someday. Marx wouldn't have much chance for refusal if the entirety of Barbosse's faction pushed for the marriage. It didn't make sense that he would instead set up his younger daughter with the youngest prince.

"Kuro, can you look into them, just in case?" Herscherik asked. "And will you let me off the hook, now...?" Seeing that Kuro nodded, Herscherik slumped back on the sofa and let out a sigh. He understood why his actions were poorly received by his men of service, as they completely contradicted their plan.

Herscherik had another reason for acting the way he did, however, other than just a simple lack of malice from the sisters. *I couldn't be mean because they reminded me of my niece.* Ryoko had had a niece who'd been in the middle of an early rebellious phase, although she knew that her niece actually loved her parents more than anything. She was always embarrassed to show it, so she acted tough—only to cry to her aunt later on.

She had still been in elementary school when Ryoko died. Herscherik remembered how that niece had been when she was Violetta's age; she would have been Jeanne's age by this point. *I wonder how she's doing...?* Herscherik reminisced about the last time Ryoko had seen her niece, staring out of the window at the sky burning from the sunset, where stars began to appear.

As their master was lost in thought, his two men of service shared a look. They had a feeling that this was going to happen. Herscherik was kind to everyone. Not that he was a philanthropist, but simply because he always put others before himself. Both of them were drawn to Herscherik for that exact quality of his, and had sworn their loyalty to him, in part, because of that.

Despite his kind heart, though, Herscherik often acted like a mirror, although he seemed not to realize it. The men of service saw it on full display when he interacted with the minister. Herscherik met benevolence with benevolence, and malice with malice. He seemed to instinctively reflect whatever emotion was shown to him. If the sisters had come to him with animosity, Herscherik would have held them at arm's length. But, as it happened, the daughters of *the* Minister Barbosse turned out to be intelligent and sincere.

Perhaps that was precisely why the minister had sent in his daughters in the first place. The men knew that, but even if Herscherik understood that possibility, he would never have considered treating them with anything less than kindness. In a way, things were going exactly how the minister had planned.

“There’s no use crying over spilt milk,” Oran resigned. “All I can do is protect Hersch.”

Kuro shared the sentiment. “I’ll go gather some info.”

The men of service each sprung to action. There was only so much they could do at the moment.

After putting her sister to sleep, Jeanne arrived outside the door to the office of Volf Barbosse. She always felt a weight settle on her shoulders whenever she stood before this imposing door. *I never get used to this place.*

Jeanne had come to this house on a winter day like this one, five years prior. She was an illegitimate child, the result of her father’s dalliance with a lady-in-waiting of his late wife. Jeanne’s mother had had the same polished-copper hair and deep-blue eyes. Barbosse had taken a liking to her for her spectacular looks, but her mother was banished from the house when his first wife at the time discovered the pregnancy. It was all just another day in the drama of aristocratic life.

Her mother had died from an illness five years ago. Jeanne was too young at the time to make her own way in the world, so she came to the Barbosse house looking for her father’s support. His first wife, the one who had booted Jeanne’s mother out of the house, had passed away years ago. His second wife had died of sickness, as well. When Jeanne knocked on his door, Barbosse had his hands full trying to raise his young daughter Violetta. So, he acknowledged Jeanne’s paternity in exchange for her help raising her sister. Looking back on it now, Jeanne knew that Barbosse’s concern for his reputation was a contributing factor.

Jeanne let out a long sigh, solidified her resolve, and knocked on the door. “Excuse me, Father.” After listening for a muffled response from within, Jeanne

entered the room.

Her father was leaning on the sofa in the center of the ink-scented office, reading a document with a drink in one hand. He never gave his daughter so much as a glance. “How were things with the prince?”

“We set up another appointment.” As neither of them considered the other a parent or child, their conversations were always robotic, as if they were merely employee and employer.

“And Violetta?”

“She... didn’t put up a fight.” Jeanne recalled how Violetta, who never showed affection to anyone but her sister, had actually looked slightly disappointed by the time they were leaving. By her bedtime, she was excitedly asking “When can I see him again?” and “If I make some sweets, will His Highness eat them?” Although, she insisted that “I only want to apologize for how rude I was today!” before tucking herself under the covers.

“Hm.” Barbosse contemplated as he knocked back his glass. Then, he spoke with gravitas, “Keep going if it looks like you can take him in as planned. If not, then, as usual...”

Jeanne anticipated the words to come, and tightened her fists.

“Take care of him.”

Jeanne closed her eyes and nodded at the definitive command. She only had one choice of answer. “Understood...” She was no daughter to her father. Jeanne earned her keep by keeping the reins on her sister and serving as a pawn.



Chapter Five: Professor Shiro, History, and Magic

The test field where the accident had occurred had been reconstructed, with its barriers redeployed. In the center stood a pair of silhouettes with quite the height difference, facing each other. One of the silhouettes belonged to the youngest prince Herscherik, and the other was the prince's magic tutor assigned to him by the Church—a young man gorgeous enough to be mistaken for an alluring woman, whom the prince called Shiro.

Shiro materialized a ball of fire above his hand, making it dance in the air before banishing it into nothingness. This was a simple attack spell. “I want to see what you're capable of. Do it.”

“Yes, sir! I definitely can't do that!” Herscherik shot his hand up, answering with an energetic smile.

Meanwhile, Shiro furrowed his brows as if he had bit into a sour lemon, ready to drop a few curses. At this point, Herscherik was used to the gorgeous death glare, even though it had rattled him at first.

“Can't...? Even if you're not *good* at it, you can at least do *that* one. Or can you not use magic *at all*?” Shiro interrogated.

“I've... technically cast a spell before...” Herscherik scratched his cheek. *I don't have any Magic, and I can only cast spells that can be accomplished with Floating Magic... I guess I don't have to hide that.* Herscherik concluded that having no Magic would not end up being a critical disadvantage. “But I don't have any Magic Within.”

Shiro looked at the prince like he was an endangered animal. “You don't have *any*?”

Herscherik had heard that people with no Magic were extremely rare: one per nation, give or take. He understood why Shiro was shocked. “Yes. But I was able to use a little magic because of *this*.” At that, Herscherik produced the silver pocket watch. “This watch can collect Floating Magic for me to cast spells...

albeit only the simplest ones.” The best he could do was create a faint ball of light, ignite a flame the size of a fingertip, or generate a cup’s worth of water.

“I see,” Shiro muttered to himself. “That’s why...” *You weren’t afraid of my powers.* Taking in Floating Magic was nothing unusual to Herscherik. Moreover, his ignorance of magic in general had allowed him to accept Shiro with ease. Disappointed by this realization, Shiro shook his head. *What was I expecting from this kid...?*

“What’s wrong, Mister Shiro? Are you not feeling well?”

Shiro dismissed Herscherik’s concern, pointing at the pocket watch. “Let me see.”

Herscherik hesitated for a moment before stroking the watch once with care and handing it over.

Shiro took the watch and closely observed it. It was an antique but tastefully designed silver pocket watch... By a layman’s appraisal, anyway. Then, Shiro’s eyes widened as he noticed some specific detail.

“An Ancient relic...?” Shiro forced himself not to jump to conclusions and squinted his amber eyes to examine the watch more closely. As he had suspected, the detailed decorations on the watch were actually composed of complex formulas unlike any Shiro had seen before. What’s more, they were written to interlock with one other. Most people would see nothing more than an ordinary pocket watch, but those who had the right knowledge would understand the true value the watch held: enough for a man to live three lifetimes in luxury.

“An Ancient relic?” Herscherik asked.

“Have you studied much history?”

Herscherik nodded. There were three periods of recorded history in this world, excluding the one they were currently living in. The one before the present was called the New Dawn Era, when the entire world was united and people lived in peaceful prosperity. At the beginning of the New Dawn Era, the world was divided into numerous nations of various sizes, all entangled in wars. Then, a hero of unknown birth and background had brought the seemingly

eternal wars to an end. This hero single-handedly stabilized the nations of the world and brought about lasting peace, like a new dawn rising after an endless dark night. The hero was later celebrated as a saint, and legends tell of them joining the gods after their death.

Much time had passed since then, though, and in Herscherik's time the world was once again divided by strife.

The Era before the New Dawn was called the Blank Era, of which no records existed. The theories that had developed to explain this ranged from a simple natural disaster to the gods literally having remade the world in some way. In any case, no one knew anything about that empty space in the timeline of this world's history.

Before that era existed the Ancient Era, the oldest in known history. The Ancient Era, it had been said, had teemed with magical technology that surpassed that of the current day, and it had lasted for tens of thousands of years. No history older than that had been uncovered. However, the Ancient civilizations had all eventually collapsed, and their technologies had been lost with them.

"If this belongs to the Ancient Era, I'm not surprised that it can convert Floating Magic," Shiro declared.

Historical documents of the era told of magical artifacts that allowed for spontaneous long-range travel, vehicles that flew like a bird in the sky, as well as objects packed with a library's worth of knowledge. These things would have been brushed off as fairy tales, if it wasn't for historical objects that most definitely dated back to the Ancient Era.

The formulas on the watch were much more intricate and complex than anything seen in the current day. It was extremely rare to see a functional relic—items like this one were being restored and researched in various nations as they spoke. What was learned from these relics would often contribute greatly to a nation's military.

Historians endlessly debated why such a powerful civilization had come to an end and why the Blank Era existed at all. Herscherik had read history books in the past, but it didn't seem like information he needed at the time, so he just

perused them without paying mind to any details. The history of the three Eras and relics aside, Herscherik was concerned with “the conversion of Floating Magic.” If the watch truly was an Ancient relic, it seemed like converting Floating Magic was actually quite a rare ability.

“Wait,” Herscherik said. “It’s not *normal* to take in Floating Magic?”

“I wouldn’t say so.”

“Huh... Really.” Herscherik stroked the pocket watch once it was returned to him. He didn’t know what to do, now that he knew that it was extremely valuable. “Maybe I should give the watch to Research...” The watch contained unfathomable value simply by virtue of being a functional Ancient relic. Herscherik didn’t know why Count Ruseria had been in possession of such a thing, or if he had understood its value. In fact, Herscherik wasn’t even sure if he should be holding on to it right now.

I don’t want to give it up, though... This wasn’t just a watch to Herscherik. It *meant* something to him.

Seeing how Herscherik became visibly upset, Shiro answered his question. “No one would solve its mystery if you gave it up to Research. It would end up in a museum like most Ancient relics. It won’t matter much if you hold on to it.”

Herscherik thought about it. “Okay!” he said, cheerfully. “Thank you, Shiro!”

Shiro looked the other way, and cleared his throat. “Now what?”

“Now...?” Herscherik parroted, as he tucked the watch away in his pocket.

“I came to teach you magic. What’s the point if you can’t use it?”

“Then...” Herscherik contemplated. “Could you teach me *about* magic? Please.” Herscherik had not learned anything about the art after discovering that he was devoid of Magic Within during his very first lesson. He had read a few magic books while he was learning to read, but none of the content stuck with him. Besides, Herscherik had decided that he shouldn’t cut contact with Shiro, who was a link with the Church—even though it was unclear if he was actually involved in the drug trafficking, the incident in the test field, or with anything that might happen next. Though, truth be told, he wasn’t ready to let go of his magic tutor who reminded him of Shiro the white cat.

Shiro sighed at Herscherik's smiling request. "All right..."

Two months had passed since Herscherik began taking magic lessons from Shiro. Twice a week, Herscherik would learn the basics of magic, as well as its history.

"Magic is separated into branches, and they are greatly affected by the natural affinity of the Spellcaster..." Herscherik said to himself, as he was reviewing what he'd learned so far in his notebook.

Magic was separated into three main branches: Elemental, Divine, and Manipulation. The most common branch was Elemental, also called Conversion spells, that converted raw Magic into elements like fire, water, light—even barriers. Since the caster changed their own Magic into the desired element, everyone had an easier time with some elements than others, which meant that a spell's effectiveness varied by person.

"That's right," Shiro chimed in. "With inspiration and training, a Spellcaster can actually combine multiple elements. For example..." Shiro explained how the spell he had used to trap that misfired fireball in the test field was a combination of water and barrier spells. He had contained the fireball with water, then kept it from affecting its surroundings with a barrier until it was extinguished.

"Couldn't you have done the same thing with just a barrier? If it cut off airflow, it should have put out the fire inside." Fire can't burn without oxygen, after all.

It was a natural observation for Herscherik, but the question elicited a surprised look from Shiro. It wasn't something he expected a child who hadn't even started attending the academy to ask. "Natural fires, or fires *caused* by magical flame can't burn without air, but since magical flames are fueled by pure Magic, airflow doesn't matter. That fireball would have kept burning as long there was Magic to fuel it. It would have been pointless and time consuming for me to maintain a barrier while I waited for all the casters' Magic to be depleted."

"I see..." Herscherik noted that magical elements were completely unlike

natural occurrences to begin with. “Does magic never use things that already exist in nature, like water or air?” This was a common trope in fantasy pieces written in Ryoko’s world, and he wondered if using regular water from the tap, for example, could save the Spellcaster on Magic when casting a water spell.

Shiro stared back at him. “You’re such an idiot.”

“Well that’s demoralizing,” Herscherik pouted his lips without any sign of actual demoralization, which was par for course for Herscherik.

Shiro let out another sigh, as he had done countless times when dealing with his less-than-excellent student. “Things in nature have a significant amount of Floating Magic in them. That counts as a separate pool of Magic. Remember how difficult it was for multiple Spellcasters to cast together?”

“So, it’s difficult to handle any kind of Magic that has different qualities than your own?”

“That’s right. So, using things in nature that contain Floating Magic is much more difficult than just converting your own Magic. Besides, you’d have to construct a formula that took natural materials into account.” *That’s why your watch and I are the outliers*, Shiro silently added. Even after understanding Shiro’s powers, Herscherik’s attitude towards his magic tutor hadn’t changed. He had only rambled on about nonsense like how never running out of Magic was “OP,” whatever that meant. Shiro didn’t know how to take Herscherik’s surprisingly casual reaction. “The point of that experiment was for each caster to adjust to each other’s Magic. The item allowed the triplets to actually cast the spell more than three times out of ten. I’d call that successful.”

The fact that the triplets, who shared a form of telepathy and had similar qualities of Magic, could only cast the spell about thirty percent of the time *with* the help of the magical item was a testament to how difficult combined spells were.

“Why are formulas necessary for magic, anyway?” Herscherik asked. “I’ve never seen them come up when you cast spells during class.” He hadn’t seen that ribbon of light around Shiro since the accident in the test field.

“Your question doesn’t make any sense. Constructing a formula and reciting an incantation is simply how you cast magic.”

“But you can cast easier spells with just an incantation.” Herscherik could use the illumination spell with just that and the watch... not that Herscherik totally understood what a formula was, anyway.

“You can *cast* it, but it’s much less efficient. For simple spells, though, it doesn’t matter much.” Shiro watched his student, who only tilted his head in confusion. “Our Magic Within isn’t bottomless. Think of Magic like physical stamina. Running somewhere instead of walking will get you there faster, but you’ll tire out faster.”

“So you spend more Magic by not using a formula?”

“Correct. It also causes more strain on your body and the results are less refined.”

“Refined?”

“A fireball spell cast with a formula, as opposed to without, will hit your target more reliably. Besides, a formula allows you to control things like the firing speed, tracking abilities, range of explosion when it lands... But, the more information you put into the formula, the longer your incantation will be and the more Magic you’ll spend.”

Herscherik’s confusion had only gotten worse. “Formulas sound hard... Not that I can use them anyway. But, but those two ribbons of light floating around you certainly were pretty!” Herscherik said with dreamy eyes, recalling the scene that he’d thought resembled an angel’s descent.

Shiro wasn’t quite thrilled by his statement. “Simple ones, you can process in your head. But when you use compound spells of that caliber or highly refined spells, the formulas materialize like that.”

Therefore, Herscherik concluded, formulas are sparkly things that appear when Spellcasters use complicated spells. “Materialize. Right. Materialize.” With his brain packed beyond capacity at the moment, Herscherik repeated the phrase rather robotically.

Shiro would not let him get away with it. “You don’t understand it, do you?” he said with a glare.

“Does not compute. I’m sorry.”

Shiro patiently elaborated. “I’m sure you can do simple additions and subtraction in your head, but it’s easier to write out more complex problems, right?”

Herscherik thought to himself that the ribbons of light were like a notepad. He was starting to become aware of how difficult it was to learn magic when he couldn’t perform any of it himself.

“The key to magic is quickly constructing a refined or efficient formula to cast an effective spell. It all comes down to the skill of the caster. And, like I said, a spell is affected by the nature of the caster’s Magic, which means two people using the same formula won’t guarantee the same results.”

Herscherik made a mental note that magic was more reliant on the individual Spellcaster than he’d thought. “Wait, what about magical items?” he asked. While he still didn’t understand the effects of an Elemental magical item, he thought that some magical items, like a scanner or something, could be used by everyone and achieve the same results.

“Magical items have built-in formulas so anyone with Magic can use them to a certain level of effectiveness. Streetlights, for example, have a formula that automatically converts Floating Magic.” Shiro went on to explain that the tools used by everyday people were called magical items, while tools that Spellcasters used to assist them in their magic were called magical devices. He added that, depending on its size and purpose, a magical item might be as large as a military weapon or an entire building.

While the conversation had derailed significantly from Elemental magic, Herscherik was keeping up now. “Then we have Divine and Manipulation... I kind of get Divine magic, I think.”

Divine magic included healing and purification spells. Healing spells treated ailments of the body, while purification spells destroyed the living dead—a phenomenon where Magic built up in animal carcasses to make them move—or exorcised the souls of the dead who harbored grudges and stayed in this world to become an evil spirit. Using Divine magic required particular characteristics like Hoenir’s. Since not many were born with that kind of Magic Within, there were few who could wield Divine spells. However, there were also non-magical

doctors and the study of medicine in this world, which kept healing Spellcasters from being completely indispensable.

I'm sure glad for that, Herscherik thought. If healing magic held such significance, then the Church that monopolized Divine magic would gain absolute power over the literal lives of everyone in this world. "That leaves us with Manipulation magic. Psychological attacks, mind control... This is kind of scary," Herscherik remarked as he reviewed his notes on the subject.

Manipulation was a branch of magic where the caster controlled Magic Within directly. Spells of this type could attack or control the mind of others—puppeteering spells and curses. These kinds of spells attacked, destroyed, or controlled the enemy's mind with Magic. Puppeteering spells, in contrast to purification, imbued Magic into corpses or inanimate objects to control them at the caster's will, and curses were just what Herscherik was expecting: spells that control the actions, mind, or life of the caster or target through mediums like words, talismans, or even contracts. The perfect branch of magic for mischief and mayhem.

"Think of it the other way around. A mind spell can be a terrifying attack—but imagine someone with severe mental trauma, for example. If you use a mind spell to help them overcome that, haven't you helped them? Besides, puppeteering controls something that is no longer, or never was, alive. One could send those animated corpses or objects into dangerous places, minimizing human casualties. Same principle for jinxes and hypnosis categorized under curses."

Herscherik nodded. "It's all in the intent of the caster." Just like a sword didn't make a murderer, using manipulation magic didn't mean that the caster was nefarious in any way.

Shiro agreed, adding, "Manipulation magic becomes drastically more difficult when dealing with another source of Magic. They're all difficult to wield and easy to fail at. Not to mention, they require intricate formulas and a lot of Magic." The success rate of mind spells relied heavily on the target's Magic and mental state. Casting a puppeteering spell on something that already had Magic in it was much more difficult and required a large amount of power. Curses simply didn't achieve much bang for the buck. Compared to other branches,

Manipulation magic was definitely the most difficult to use effectively. “Besides, any important place in the country, like the entire castle and the outer quarters we’re in, will be covered in barriers to prevent Manipulation magic. Don’t worry about it.”

That came as a relief to Herscherik. He was just wondering how he would deal with his father or brothers being controlled by a hostile Spellcaster. What’s more, according to Shiro, royalty were less susceptible to Manipulation magic since they had more Magic Within than most. *And if a spell that powerful existed, Barbosse would have used it. But then,* Herscherik realized, *Barbosse manipulates Father like a marionette even without magic.* He tightened his fist under the desk. He needed to act fast, before his country would become entirely doomed.

“We’re done for today,” Shiro said, as he began erasing the blackboard. His demeanor had not changed at all over the past two months, always showing up with a grumpy expression. Despite his attitude, he had always been punctual.

Herscherik did notice that Shiro was a little less crabby when talking about magic. “I can tell you really like this topic, Mister Shiro.”

“Huh?” Shiro frowned, dusting chalk from his clothes. He looked at Herscherik as if the prince was some bizarre little animal he had never seen before. “What are you talking about?” He scowled.

Herscherik was beginning to recognize when Shiro was masking his positive emotions. “You don’t frown when you’re talking magic.” He pointed between his own brows.

Shiro reflexively covered his forehead and glared even more sharply at the prince. “It’s all I have...” He had been called a monster, forsaken by his parents, all because of the powers he was born with. “But without it, I would have never met *him*...” Shiro muttered aloud without realizing it.

“You mean Archbishop Hoenir?” Herscherik’s reaction was met by another glare from Shiro, but he paid it no mind. “You must be really fond of him, too.”

“Hmph...” Shiro didn’t deny the comment, but only looked away, his ears slightly reddened. “Master Hoenir is the only reason I’m alive and have been able to study magic. That’s all it is.”

Despite Shiro's attempt to sound cavalier, Herscherik sensed much weight behind the comment. Just as Herscherik was about to ask Shiro to elaborate, they heard a knock at the door. Herscherik opened the door to let Kuro into the room.

"Prince Hersch. Your next appointment is pressing."

"Uh, what was it, again?"

"With the daughters of Marquis Barbosse," Kuro answered, maintaining a perfect mask. He was only putting on the flawless butler act because Shiro was there; if they had been alone, Kuro would have displayed his great exasperation.

"Right!" Herscherik hurriedly began clearing the desk of his notes. He had indeed scheduled an appointment to see the Barbosse sisters in the afternoon. It was past noon already.

"Then I'll be going."

"Oh, wait, Mister Shiro!" Herscherik called. "Would you like to go on a date with me?"

Shiro's shapely brow shot up.

Chapter Six: The Prince, the Date, and Life's Purpose

This particular day, after the snow had melted for the year and the sun shone down to bid winter farewell, was a delightful one for Violetta. Two months had passed since her first meeting with Herscherik. Each meeting with the prince had been wonderful: tea parties, dance practice, listening to her sister's compositions... and every time Herscherik's gentle green eyes met hers, Violetta's heart raced.

At each meeting, she had found something new to like about Herscherik: his kindness, his work ethic, his knowledge, his friendly demeanor, his maturity, his surprising stubbornness... When she asked if she could address him by first name, his embarrassed 'yes' had made her feel positively delighted. When he had agreed to speak more candidly with her, she nearly danced with joy on the spot. She always dreaded their goodbyes and counted the days until their next meeting. Violetta didn't yet understand what to call this feeling. All she knew was her heart warmed and a smile appeared on her face whenever she thought of him.

"Prince Herscherik!" She curtsied like a proper lady to Herscherik as soon as he appeared through the door, fluttering her skirt. She'd spent all morning picking out her dress. Of course, she had asked her sister to do her makeup and hair. Her sister curtsied beside her, and Violetta couldn't help but feel proud of her older sister's refined gesture.

"Hello, Violetta. Miss Jeanne. I'm sorry I was late," Herscherik stated in a genuine apology.

"We were told that Your Highness would be delayed by his studies. Please do not apologize for our sake. We were simply enjoying our tea."

Herscherik shook his head. "A promise is a promise. Studying is no reason for me to break my word." With another apology, Herscherik urged the sisters to take their seats and joined them.

Kuro immediately prepared a cup of tea for his master, which Herscherik

took. Violetta couldn't help but stare at his elegant gestures.

Herscherik set his cup down and gave Violetta a bright smile. "You're very pretty as always, Violetta."

"Thank... you..." she answered with a blush. Violetta had been told that men tended not to notice when a woman changed something about themselves, but Herscherik seemed to be an exception.

In addition to her outfit, he often complimented more specific aspects of her appearance—like how she did her hair, her lipstick color, or her jewelry. Violetta's heart skipped a beat each time, thinking about how Herscherik had observed her with such detail. The truth was that Herscherik, as a former woman, noticed those little changes and simply gave his honest opinion.

As if to conceal her reddened cheeks, Violetta produced a pouch from the basket she had brought and handed it to Herscherik. "Prince Herscherik, I baked some cookies today."

"You made me sweets again? Thank you, Violetta. Do you mind if I eat them now? I actually didn't have lunch..."

"Of course not!"

She had brought the best-looking cookies out of the slightly burnt batch that she had baked all on her own... with her sister's help, here and there.

Herscherik untied the ribbon holding the pouch closed and took out a cookie. It seemed a little crunchy for a cookie when he took his first bite, but Herscherik seemed to enjoy it, chewing it a bit before swallowing. "The nuts and chocolate... I like those kinds of flavors."

"I'm glad!" Violetta cheered.

"Your baking gets better every time, Violetta."

Violetta's cheeks flushed again. Still, she was unhappy about one little thing. Herscherik, after all this time, still called her Violetta. He was certainly of a high enough status to call her whatever he pleased—in fact, he only addressed his men of service by nicknames, and no one else. Violetta couldn't help but feel a divide between her and Herscherik because of that, though. She desperately

wanted him to call her 'Vivi.'

"Prince Herscherik, if you would..."

"Yes?" Herscherik stared at her, cookie in hand.

"Nothing..." Violetta relented, too nervous to ask Herscherik for the favor now that he was looking straight at her.

Curious about why Violetta seemed to be acting a little odd, Herscherik finished the cookie. "Thank you. That was delicious."

"It's nothing..." Violetta muttered. "What shall we do today?"

"Why don't we go out into town? We'll be safe with Oran. But there is someone else I want to take with us. I'll introduce you two later." Herscherik apologetically furrowed his brow. "I hate to ask, but... Do you mind changing your clothes, Violetta? I've had an outfit prepared for you. For Miss Jeanne, too."

After Herscherik explained how they would stand out too much as they were, the sisters followed Kuro into another room to change.

After about twenty minutes or so, the sisters returned in their new outfits.

"What do you think, Prince Herscherik?" Violetta twirled in her one-piece dress. It was more reserved than her original outfit, but still gave off of the impression of a classy, aristocratic girl. Her hair had been wrapped into a bun above her head to make her more mobile.

Jeanne had also changed into the kind of outfit city girls her age might wear. With her copper hair put in a braid, she came across as a well-mannered young woman.

"You both look very cute," Herscherik said, happily. He too, had put on his "young-noble-heir" outfit, his usual getaway disguise.

A knock was heard at the door, followed by Oran entering. "Are you ready, Prince Hersch?" His knight's uniform had been set aside for his more ordinary casual wear.

"We're all ready. You?"

“Us too.”

Then another figure entered the room at Oran’s call. The sisters were both struck speechless. They were convinced that they had encountered a goddess of beauty, with perfectly straight white hair and amber eyes. Even the best artist in the world would struggle to recreate such beauty. The goddess in question, meanwhile, wore a frown as he picked at his masculine outfit.

“This is Shiro, my magic tutor.”

The man who received the introduction only glanced at the sisters once without greeting them. Herscherik couldn’t help but be impressed at how even Shiro’s lack of etiquette came across as elegant.

She’s absolutely stunning... Violetta thought. She couldn’t believe such beauty existed in this world. If anyone had told her that Shiro was a goddess, she would have believed them. That being said, there was one nagging question on her mind. “Prince Herscherik... Do you prefer older women...?” she mumbled.

“Huh?” Herscherik blurted out, then realized that the sisters’ eyes were glued to Shiro. “My preferences aside, Mister Shiro’s a man.”

“What?!” Violetta shouted in surprise, and Shiro huffed at the reaction.

“Prince Hersch...”

“Yes, let us go.”

Led by Oran, Herscherik and Violetta followed side by side. This left Jeanne and Shiro to fall back behind them.

“Didn’t expect to see you here...” Shiro spoke, softly enough that no one but Jeanne heard him, but without actually looking at her. His tone was considerably lower than when he spoke to Herscherik. Jeanne answered with silence. “What are you up to?”

Jeanne bit her lip. From how Shiro asked that question alone, Jeanne felt like he was looking right through her. “I’m just chaperoning my sister,” she spat out.

Shiro lifted one corner of his lips, but said nothing else.

Yes. I’m Violetta’s dear sister, now. Nothing else... She played the role of the protective sister, but she was also her father’s pawn who executed his orders.

Even killed, when necessary. Jeanne knew full well what her role was in her father's eyes. Then, Jeanne watched the prince walking in front of her. He had a smile on his face, as if he was indulging Violetta's whims. He didn't seem uncomfortable—more like he was an adult listening to a child's demands. Somehow, this seven-year-old boy was much more mature than he looked.

“Won't you play us that song again, Miss Jeanne?” Herscherik had requested after one of his dance practices with Violetta. He meant the wordless song that she had been singing when they first met. When she asked him why he was so keen on that particular song, he said “It's nostalgic to me somehow,” with an embarrassed look. Then, he had pleaded with those puppy-dog eyes that children were so good at. Of course, Jeanne had relented and played the tune. The prince, while listening to the song, seemed even more mature than he usually did—as if he was some traveler doomed to never return to his distant home. His expression was so painfully sad that she couldn't help but offer to play the song again when she was done. Jeanne was delighted to see that Herscherik's sorrowful expression turned into a bright smile when she did.

Jeanne caught herself smiling as she thought back on that event. *What was wrong with me...?* She never found an answer to the question, and it simply sank back down into her heart.

Jeanne and Shiro continued to follow, the tail end of the now silent party. Neither of them realized that someone was listening in on the conversation between them.

Herscherik didn't go to the castle's front gate, but instead to one of the back entrances used by merchants as well as soldiers, knights, and officers who worked at the castle. The front gate was reserved for nobles and guests, after all. However, as this particular back gate opened to a less populated area in town, it would serve Herscherik better.

The guard, whom Herscherik was well acquainted with by now, gave him a knowing smile. “Thank you, Your Highness, for properly submitting a request *before* your departure this time.”

Herscherik answered the wisecrack by coyly sticking his tongue out. They

were well acquainted enough to joke with each other. On paper, royalty was always required to submit a request before leaving the castle outside of their schedule. Herscherik had learned to simply ditch all of those ‘stupidly bureaucratic’ rules. He used to just sneak out of the castle whenever he wanted to go into town, but the best he could manage with that method was a day trip. During his Fortune Favors the Bold operations, day trips were less useful. So, he had started leaving by the castle’s official gates recently.

At first, he would casually try to walk out of the gate with a friendly “Good work, men!” to the guard on duty, like a soldier or officer on their way off of work, which almost let him slip by. When he was caught just in time, Oran made a solid effort to pretend he didn’t hear his master click his tongue in disappointment. The guard had desperately tried to stop the little prince, impressing upon Herscherik the fact that he really needed to submit the proper paperwork and that it was dangerous beyond the walls. Herscherik stubbornly refused, which led to the manager of castle security actually coming to the scene.

“You say it’s dangerous outside. Is crime that rampant in our country?” Herscherik sorrowfully asked the manager. He was just changing the subject, but seeing that the manager fell silent, he continued. “Besides, when even a whole gang of them couldn’t lay a finger on my knight...” He gave Oran an apologetic look.

Oran had swept the Games of Contest without a scratch, which had meant his prowess was well-known. In fact, a battle royale-style combat training had been planned at a later date—secretly, the purpose of it was to knock Oran down a peg by ganging up on him. Oran had met the challenge head-on and defeated every other fighter out there, instilling fear in the rest of the soldiers. Even Oran’s brothers had been excited to join the fray. “Are they really my family? I don’t know anymore,” he muttered as he gazed into the distance.

Herscherik had only been told about this incident after the fact. “You requested Oran to be there, and you ambushed him?” he had snarled, not even trying to conceal his anger for once. Naturally, since the leaders of both departments had been involved in orchestrating this, the head of security had clammed up from guilt.

After striking the guards speechless on his first attempt to simply walk out of the castle, Herscherik added, “I don’t want you to get in trouble for my actions.” With that, Herscherik retreated for the day, much to the relief of the security team.

The next day, Herscherik had returned with a permit to leave the castle signed by the king himself, as well as by Oran who swore to take full responsibility if something should happen to the prince. According to another guard’s testimony at a later date, he spent a lot of time staring into space that day, too.

The overprotective king Solye, before signing the permit, had sat Herscherik on his lap and nagged him for nearly an hour about everything under the sun: don’t follow strangers or accept food from them, scream if someone tries to start a fight, don’t try to get away from Octavian, don’t go near any dangerous areas, etc., etc. Herscherik couldn’t very well confess that he had wandered the castle town alone so often that the townsfolk had grown accustomed to feeding Herscherik whenever he was there.

“We have ladies in our company, this time,” he told the guard. “I’ll see you soon.” He had gone through the permit request that he usually omitted since the Marquis’ daughters were in their company.

“May you have a wonderful time, Your Highness. Ladies,” the guard cheerfully declared. He was a man, after all, and had a weakness for pretty girls.

I won’t tell him that one of them’s a man, Herscherik thought, and pretended not to see how grumpy Shiro looked. “Oh, everyone in town will call me by a different name, but don’t worry about that. And don’t tell anyone I’m royalty, please,” Herscherik instructed the other three as they approached the edge of the city, pulling his hood further down over his face. Unlike back in the day when not even people in the castle would recognize him, he had more than a few acquaintances now. If he were to pass any of them on the street and they heard him being called a prince, it would just cause confusion. Herscherik was still known as Ryoko there.

Once they reached the town, the party simply traveled wherever they pleased. Violetta wandered to and fro, mesmerized by the fact that she was

now walking through streets she had only ever seen through the windows of a carriage. This kept Jeanne occupied, unable to ever let go of her sister's hand.

As Herscherik watched the two sisters, he was approached by all walks of people.

"Look at you, Ryoko, walking around town with a flock of gorgeous ladies!" the owner of the sweets shop called out to him.

His wife heard him talking to Herscherik and brought out a paper bag from behind the counter, handing it over. "These are our new recipes for the year. Don't forget to share them with the girls, Ryoko."

As he took the bag, Herscherik gazed up at Oran, waiting for him to pay for it. Before Oran could produce his wallet, the sweet shop couple shook their heads and refused. *Well*, Herscherik thought, *it would be rude to insist on paying now*. He simply thanked the couple and left.

"What's in there, Prince Herscherik?" Violetta whispered.

Herscherik opened the bag to show her the contents. Inside was a serving of crispy, fried dough that reminded Herscherik of the *sata andagi* he'd enjoyed as Ryoko, in his previous life.

A smile blossomed on Violetta's face. "They look wonderful!"

Herscherik couldn't help but smile with her. "Let's share them later."

"Share?"

Share...? Just the two of us? It's like we're really on a date! Violetta put her hands to her blushing cheeks, which would soon turn redder from a different sense of embarrassment.

"Yes, I think there's enough for all of us," Herscherik said without a shred of maliciousness.

As Violetta was looking for a rock to hide under, she overheard the conversation between the owner of a nearby fish store and one of his customers.

The owner let out a long sigh. "Hey, did you hear taxes are going up *again*?"

The customer clucked his tongue, frowning. “Yeah. Apparently, something’s happening on the southwestern border, so National Defense needs more funding. That’s the story, anyway.”

“Meanwhile, the royal family’s throwing parties day in and day out... They just think they can squeeze more out of us every time they run out of money.”

Herscherik awkwardly let his gaze wander. The royalty throwing a party every day was, of course, an exaggeration, but the increase in taxes was not. After Herscherik had been warned by Count Grim at the New Year’s ball, a report came in that the Atrad Empire to the west was stationing troops near the border, where the kingdom and empire had clashed numerous times before. This had led to a decision to reinforce border security, followed by a temporary tax increase.

Herscherik wasn’t made aware of this until after the decision had already been made. While he had no qualms with reinforcing the border, he felt like there were other places where they could tighten the national purse strings before increasing taxes. However, there was no way for him to object to the move, let alone any way for his powerless father to do anything. Marx, too, had been unable to prevent the motion from passing. That didn’t mean Herscherik had given up on doing something about it.

Herscherik recalled his actions that followed, a grin spreading across his face. *Heh heh heh... Now that was a job well done.* Based on experience and accomplishments, Herscherik had calculated the salary of the soldiers being deployed, as well as the cost for transporting the troops and maintaining a secure border. Then, he added in the cost of the materials and equipment required to fortify the border line—all with current and accurate market price in mind, of course. From current tax revenue, he estimated the income for the fiscal year, and calculated how much they could afford to spend now. Then, he presented the budget to Solye through Marx.

Solye used Herscherik’s documents to convince the reluctant officers, keeping the emergency tax raise to a minimum. If no one tried to pocket anything, the project would stay within budget. If it went over, they would take the rest from the nobility. *They work hard to keep their coffers full,* Herscherik concluded. Indeed, it was legal for the royal family to seize any assets from nobles and

high-ranking officials in the name of national defense. As Herscherik had expected, the threat had led to all of them working hard to keep their wallets secure.

Still sucks for the people, though... There were people in any world who disliked higher taxes and bigger financial burdens, of course—especially when they didn't feel like their lives were enriched by their increased taxes.

"Shh... Keep it down! Here comes a constable," the fish shop owner warned in a hushed tone.

The customer didn't lower his voice. "I ain't afraid of no constable! They'll turn a blind eye for pocket change. I bet we could all share a drink and commiserate over those rotten nobles and royals!"

Herscherik silently groaned. It was true that some members of the constabulary were like that. The majority were honest peacekeepers, of course, but the ones doing wrong garnered the most attention. All it took was one out of ten being corrupt to make all of them look bad.

I don't think we should stick around. Just as Herscherik turned to make that suggestion, he realized that Violetta had vanished. He looked around to find her marching towards the men whose conversation they had just overheard.

She stopped before them and dramatically pointed a finger at them. "How dare you disrespect the royal family like that?!" Violetta demanded. The others froze.

"What's a prim and proper girl like you doing, eavesdropping on peasants?" The customer, a portly man five times the size of Violetta, growled down at her.

Any other girl her age might have been intimidated to the point of tears, but not Violetta. "None of your business. But what you've said was very disrespectful! Take it back this instant!" *How can they mock Prince Herscherik like that when they don't know anything about him!* Violetta couldn't stand it, precisely because she knew how he smiled so gently and always considered the people of his country, even as walked among them on the streets.

"Disrespectful? It's all true. Now, if you don't knock it off..."

Jeanne was the first one to spring to action. "I apologize for my sister!" She

grabbed Violetta, covering her mouth. Despite mumbling and movement behind her hand, it resolutely remained over Violetta's lips.

When the men were about to say something, two figures—large and small—came between them and the sisters. “Now, now. Can't we let it slide? She's just a little girl.” Oran cracked a friendly grin.

“Y-You're...!” The pair recognized Oran, the guardian of a familiar face, who was now protecting the two apologetic-looking sisters.

“I'm sorry...”

“Ryoko...” The shopkeep and the customer shared an awkward look. For anyone in the castle town, Ryoko was no ordinary rich boy, but an eccentric noble's heir, most likely very important in the country. His down-to-earth and genuine demeanor had made him popular among the people of the castle town.

That was why the men felt awkward that he had apparently overheard their conversation. “Don't apologize, Ryoko. It's our mistake. We know some nobles are like you, but...” Once the heat of the moment had passed, they understood that they had gone too far. They couldn't help but look for someone to blame for their worsening lives.

“It's all right. If that's how we seem to the people here, then I appreciate the honest assessment.” Herscherik then apologized again, before taking Violetta, Jeanne, and Shiro (now completely out of the loop) away from the scene.

Now, only Oran was left behind. “I won't say much after what Ryoko said.” His blue eyes pierced the two men. He was no longer the gentle chaperone they were used to—a chill that had nothing to do with the weather ran down their spines. “Be careful spreading unverified information. It could end up costing you.” And with that, Oran left.

The two men remained frozen on the spot.

In a small plaza, surrounded by buildings that often served as hangouts for children, housewives, and the elderly, stood a grand old tree with a few benches placed around it. This place of relaxation was now deserted as the sun was just beginning to set.

“This will be a nice place to settle down for a bit. I hope you’re not too tired, Violetta,” Herscherik said with a determinedly cheery tone. However, his efforts went unrewarded.

“I’m sorry, Prince Herscherik...” Violetta muttered, staring at the ground and holding back tears.

“Don’t worry about it,” Herscherik reassured with a calm tone. “They’re right. The rest of the royal family and I are the ones forcing them to foot the bill.”

“But...!” Violetta was ashamed of her immaturity. She knew that she would cause a scene by speaking up to those men. Even still, she couldn’t stand how they’d denigrated Herscherik. As a result, she’d ended up forcing the prince to apologize to them.

“I know that you were frustrated on my behalf, Violetta. Thank you.” Herscherik smiled, preventing Violetta from apologizing again. The problems of the nation and the discontent of the people fell squarely on the shoulders of the royal family. Violetta had no business carrying any part of that weight. Whether or not any blame for the situation truly rested on the royal family wasn’t important.

Having been born into nobility and raised in that environment, Violetta was wise for her age in some ways; as such, she understood how Herscherik felt. She refrained from saying anything more.

“It’s getting late in the day. Shall we return to the castle after we rest for a bit? I’m a little tired myself, and I’d love to have a few of those sweets,” Herscherik jested.

“Prince Herscherik!” Violetta stood up. “I’ll go buy some drinks from that stand we passed!”

It wasn’t a task for a noble girl to do, but Herscherik couldn’t stop her as she nearly bolted out of the plaza. Besides, he figured if the little errand distracted Violetta for a bit, there wasn’t any harm in it. “Okay,” Herscherik said. “Oran, can you go with her?”

“Yes.” Oran followed the little girl as she dashed away.

After watching them for a few steps, he sat down on a bench. Shiro had also

sat down on a different bench, leaving Jeanne standing alone.

“Why don’t you take a seat, Miss Jeanne?”

“The people of the castle town truly adore Your Highness,” Jeanne said, still standing.

Despite having his invitation ignored, Herscherik chuckled. “More like they look after me. They’re all good people... And they don’t know I’m royalty.” Loneliness seeped into his smile. With a few exceptions, no one in the castle town knew who Herscherik really was—they only knew him as the peculiar aristocratic boy named Ryoko. He wondered what they would think if they discovered that he was royalty. He couldn’t bring himself to hope they’d still accept him with the same openness. “They wouldn’t even come near me if they knew I was a prince.”

“Then why do you bother coming out here at all?” Shiro chimed in. “It’s plain to see that you spend a lot of time in town. Today can’t be the first time you’ve overheard a conversation like that.”

Shiro was right. This was far from the first time that Herscherik had encountered the people of the castle town sharing criticism and discontent with the government, contempt for the upper class, and stories of crooked officials. They all led to denouncing the royal family.

“What’s the point in putting yourself out there, knowing you’ll get hurt?” Shiro spat. “If you don’t want to look, close your eyes. Don’t want to hear something? Cover your ears. There’s no virtue in just standing there taking all that abuse.” *If you stop getting involved, it won’t hurt.* People always had a choice, Shiro believed. They can choose to shut out anything they don’t need.

To Herscherik, it sounded like Shiro was trying to convince himself more than anything. Truth to tell, Herscherik was also tempted by these thoughts. But he shook his head. “I know. But I’m a prince.” That was Herscherik’s purpose in this life. Herscherik couldn’t afford to take Shiro’s suggestion, no matter how tempting it might seem. He stood, and began walking.

“Prince Herscherik?” Jeanne called.

Herscherik answered, still walking away, “I only have food on my table and

clothes on my back because the citizens of this nation work hard every day. That's my privilege for being born into royalty." Herscherik stopped and turned around, now far enough away that he could see the entirety of the great tree, as well as Jeanne and Shiro. "I can't run away just because I'm scared of getting hurt. It's my royal duty to serve my people." The voice of the people was the voice of the nation, their woes were its woes, and their joy was the nation's joy. Herscherik realized that he couldn't ignore even the smallest grievance. Even if he couldn't answer them all, he must never stop trying.

"Why does it have to be you...?" Shiro squeezed out, as if he was struggling with something within. "No one asked *you* to do all this."

"It's not about being asked. It's something I *want* to do." It wasn't that Herscherik was following orders or wanted validation from other people. He simply wanted to do it, because he had things he wanted to protect. "So..." Herscherik continued. "I'll show no mercy to anyone who stands in my way or tries to hurt my family." Herscherik's tone was unimaginably colder than usual. The youngest prince had always reminded them of the spring sun, but now it was almost as though he was standing in a gust of frigid, stinging air from the far north.

The pair caught in Herscherik's gaze were speechless and frozen.

A cheerful call broke the tension. "Prince Herscherik!"

Herscherik shook off the cold aura that had grown up around him and turned to face Violetta. "Viol—Oran!" After a moment of shock, Herscherik immediately called to his knight. A man was approaching them from behind.

Oran tossed the cup he was holding into the air. He turned as he drew his sword, blocking the attack. A metallic clash echoed through the plaza, and Violetta was immobilized by the terrifying noise. Keeping her behind his back, Oran glared at the attacker. "If you're just some street thug, beat it. It's your lucky day... But if you know who you're dealing with, I won't hold back." That was Oran's final warning.

The attacker ignored him, pulling back his sword before immediately going for another swing. Oran easily parried the fierce attack. The only reason he didn't immediately counter was because Violetta was right behind him.

Picking up on that, Herscherik shouted, “Over here, Violetta! Hurry!”

The call snapped Violetta out of her terrified daze. She dropped the cup where she stood and began running to escape from the scene of battle. When she had nearly reached Herscherik, another attacker appeared from one of the other four streets that led out of the plaza. He had been hiding around the corner of the building.

“Vi!” Herscherik darted towards her as soon he saw the second attacker, reaching his hand towards her. As soon as she took it, Herscherik pulled her close and wrapped his arms around her as hard as he could.

“Prince Herscherik!” Her cry echoed through the plaza.

Herscherik held her tightly even as she screamed, turning his back towards the attacker. A knife gleamed in the assailant’s hand as he raised it high, ready to strike Herscherik.

As Herscherik braced for the impending agony, a gust of wind blew past him, followed by a loud impact and a muffled groan. Herscherik timidly looked up to find the attacker slumped completely unconscious by the fractured wall of a building. He looked back at Oran to see his opponent collapsed at his feet.

“Punks.”

Herscherik turned towards the voice. Shiro’s white hair was glowing a vivid green. It was clear to see that he had saved Herscherik with a spell. “Thank you, Mister Shiro...” Herscherik said, stroking Violetta’s hair as she clung to him in fear.

As a few stars began to peek out in the sky, Herscherik had come with Oran to the front gate in order to see the sisters off. The attackers seemed to be ordinary street criminals, so they had turned them over to the constabulary before safely returning to the castle. As Shiro had already returned to the Church, Herscherik and Oran were seeing off their final guests for the day.

“I’m so sorry I put you in danger today,” Herscherik apologized to Jeanne. Violetta, worn out with exhaustion and fear, had already nodded off in her carriage.

Before falling asleep, she had asked Herscherik, “Can you always call me ‘Vi’ from now on?”

Herscherik, who still felt guilty about what had happened, agreed. Relieved, Violetta had finally fallen asleep after hearing his promise.

“There’s no need for that, Your Highness...” Jeanne shook her head. She didn’t look too well herself. “How does Your Highness remain so strong?”

Herscherik tilted his neck. *Strong?* Herscherik looked down at himself. It was the same old, feeble body with no muscle to speak of. No matter how hard he tried, Herscherik couldn’t think of any part of him that was strong.

“Yes, Your Highness is very strong,” Jeanne added, as if she had read his mind.

Herscherik remained confused. “Miss Jeanne, I’m not strong at all. I mean, just look at me.”

“That’s not what I mean. Not physically... but your heart and your determination... Your Highness is very strong on the *inside*.”

As she silently confirmed how frail he was, Herscherik answered, “That’s especially not true.” Herscherik chuckled. “Sometimes I think about how I could be wrong, and I’m tempted to just give it all up.” Not that he would use it as an excuse, but even he got tired of his work. But the people he remembered at times like that were always the one who had passed on and entrusted him with this task, and the one whose path had been chosen for him, along with his dear family and the two people closest to him who believed in him. He only had one wish: to change this country. Only that would satisfy him. “I don’t want to have any more regrets.” He would believe in himself and his allies, and soldier on in order to make his wish a reality.

Jeanne only gave a deep curtsey, and climbed into the carriage. *He doesn’t consider himself strong... But His Highness’ strength lies in how dedicated he is to pursuing his goals.* It was a characteristic that contrasted strongly with her own personality—a strength that lay with a powerful sense of self. *There’s no way he’ll join us. He’ll choose death over compromise.* As the carriage rocked, she buried her face in her palms. Otherwise, she felt like she was going to burst out in tears.

After seeing the sisters off, Herscherik and Oran turned right around. They continued down the castle corridors, giving the knights and officials they passed the same warm smile as usual.

When they reached the passageway in the courtyard of the Royal Quarter, Herscherik dropped his smiling mask, revealing a sharp glare beneath it.

“How’d this get out...?” Herscherik asked, still walking.

A figure lurked in the shadows. Now, Kuro appeared out of the darkness at his master’s call. “It could have been either the minister or the Church, or neither,” he answered, adorned in pitch-black spy gear that blended into the night, walking alongside the prince without even an audible footfall.



Herscherik looked at the ground. He had purposefully submitted a permit for leaving the castle today in order to track how information was being leaked. He wanted to dangle something on a hook and see how the enemy would bite, but that operation had all been for naught. *Minister or Church... It'd be great if our assailants gave something away, but I doubt it.* Herscherik stopped to think a bit before looking up at Oran. "Which do you think?"

"They were after Lady Violetta. Lady Jeanne seemed shaken by it, so I'd say she didn't know. If *that* was an act, I'll never trust a woman again." After looking into Jeanne's background, they had discovered a secret about her. But seeing how she reacted that day, they agreed that Jeanne had no part in the attack, at least. "I thought that made it less likely that the attack came from the minister... But seeing how the Spellcaster protected you, I can't say one way or the other."

Shiro, who was practically assigned to Herscherik by the Church itself, had protected him, so he agreed with Oran's assessment. *It's not the minister or the Church...? Could it be a third faction?* Herscherik had made enemies all over through his Fortune Favors the Bold operation. Obviously, they had all brought their downfall upon themselves, but Herscherik was well aware of this risk when he conceived the operation. That being said, those had all been under the minister's thumbs. He couldn't imagine that any of them would dare attack the minister's daughter.

Oran shared a momentary look with Kuro. "Hersch. What were you *really* up to today?"

Herscherik snapped his head up and let his gaze wander. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Oran walked in front of his master, staring straight into his jade eyes. "I get that you wanted to see what they'd do. But there was no need to put yourself in this much danger. You agree, Black Dog?"

With a confirming nod, Kuro shot Herscherik a piercing glare. He had opposed this plan from the start. He had followed them all day, carefully observing their surroundings. He had remained close until the attack—in fact, there had originally been five people stalking Herscherik. Kuro had taken out three by the

time they swung into action. He had already turned those three in to the constabulary on the charge of suspicious activity. As Herscherik was holding Violetta, about to be struck down, Kuro held himself back when he realized that Shiro was casting a spell. He considered it quite lucky that Herscherik had gotten away without a scratch. One wrong move and he could have ended up dead.

Herscherik chuckled at the pair of accusatory looks. *They saw right through it. Can't keep anything from these two, can I?* He felt bad about keeping a secret from them, but also happy and a little embarrassed. Who wouldn't have? *Time to throw in the towel...* Herscherik made up his mind to come clean. "I wanted to warn them."

"Warn them?"

"Yes. Even though Mister Shiro and Miss Jeanne have their secrets, they don't seem like bad people." Over the past two months, Herscherik had observed those observing him. Regardless of whoever loomed behind them, Herscherik couldn't bring himself to believe that either of them were truly rotten to the core. So, he had shown them his true colors to give them a warning, even if it had put him in a tougher position. "If I can help it, I don't want to hurt Mister Shiro, or Miss Jeanne, or Violetta."

"You're soft-hearted," Kuro reprimanded with exasperation.

Oran quietly sighed. He seemed to share the sentiment.

"I'm sorry..." A whisper left Herscherik's lips. He knew that he would be putting Kuro and Oran, as well as himself, in danger. *Still...* Herscherik tightened his fists.

"It's who you are," Kuro said. His tone was very gentle.

"We'll figure it out." Oran sounded just the same.

Herscherik closed his eyes. They would always be by his side. The prince quietly promised himself that he would become worthy of their devotion, one day. "Thank you, you two."

They each nodded, fully accepting their master.

“Oh, one more thing,” Kuro said. “That girl Jeanne and the Spellcaster know each other.”

A noble’s daughter and the adopted son of an archbishop didn’t share any social circles. If anything... “They may have some connection we can’t see.”

They now understood the connection between the minister and the Church, but Herscherik didn’t truly believe that they shared the same ultimate goals, even if they were cooperating.

“And the Church is up to something,” Kuro added, as the other two were stunned by the added information.

After putting her sister to bed, Jeanne came to her father’s office to report the events of the day. When she entered the familiar, oppressively solemn room, her father was reading through documents, like always.

“I am home, Father. May I ask you a question...?”

“No. Just tell me your conclusion,” Barbosse interrupted as Jeanne tried to ask if he was the one who ordered the attack. His eyes, however, remained pointed toward his documents.

Jeanne looked down, silenced. She tightened her fists. The time had come to finally make the report she had been putting off as long as she could. Her conclusion, however, was obvious. Even without the events of this day, she had encountered numerous occasions when she could feel the strength of Herscherik’s resolve.

“It’s impossible to turn the prince to our side,” she declared.

Barbosse, for the first time since Jeanne entered the room, looked away from the documents in his hand and gave her a sharp glare. “Violetta failed?” he demanded in a booming voice.

Jeanne couldn’t read a single shred of her father’s emotions. “Violetta and the prince have a good relationship.” Her sister was smitten with the prince, although she didn’t seem to fully realize her feelings were romantic in nature. It was clear to see for anyone else, though. Herscherik himself treated Violetta with kindness, too. In fact, he had just today protected her with his life. Still,

Jeanne knew that he would never break. He had declared that he would show no mercy for anyone who stood in his way. “The prince will never join our side.”

Jeanne’s report was met with silence. Right now, she only wished for one thing. *This is outrageous. Please reconsider...* Jeanne knew full well that her father had committed numerous crimes to maintain his power and that she was serving an active part in it. This one thing, however, was too much to bear. Out of everyone else in the world, Herscherik was the one person she didn’t want to hurt. Her wish, however, would be denied.

“Take care of him, as planned,” he commanded in a nonchalant yet ruthless fashion, as if he was telling her to get rid of a broken toy.

“Father! The prince is only a child! It is very possible that he’ll be sent off to some foreign country soon enough!” Jeanne cried, knowing that she would only buy the prince a little bit of time, if anything. Herscherik would surely stand in her father’s way in the future, no matter what happened.

Annoyed at Jeanne’s first sign of resistance, Barbosse let out a sigh. Then, he looked at her without any emotion, as if he had just noticed a loose stone on the sidewalk. “What is your purpose in saying this?”

“But...!”

“If you wish to disobey me, leave this house. I don’t mind using Violetta to take care of things instead.”

Jeanne pictured the face of her sister, who was the only person who ever loved her unconditionally. “Yes... Sir...” Even if it meant that Violetta would hate her forever, Jeanne had no choice but to obey.

The Grand Cathedral, dimly lit, was dedicated to the worship of various gods, with the creator god at their center. An altar stood before the enormous stone statue of the creator god, where Hoenir the archbishop gave his sermons by day. Facing him, his followers were seated in row after row of pews, devotedly listening to the archbishop’s sermon.

In the now closed and empty Grand Cathedral, Shiro sat on the front pew, gazing up at the statues of the gods.

“Noel,” Hoenir called from behind him. “What did you think of your past two months with the prince?”

“Nothing...” Shiro turned the other way. At first, he had considered Herscherik a bizarre example of a royal. The little prince did not fear his monstrous nature, and would always approach and talk to him no matter how many times Shiro pushed him away. As a result, the prince had quietly infiltrated his heart. Even though he was incompetent with magic, Herscherik had been incredibly curious about it, soaking up knowledge like he was a sponge.

Then, there was the side of the prince that Shiro had seen that day—someone with an aura completely unlike his usual self. “No mercy for those who stand in my way,” he had said. *How much did he know?* Shiro wondered. His adoptive father Hoenir was concerned about the country’s current state. The royal family oppressed the people, and while the Church stayed out of politics, they were also the ones to hear their laments and provide support for those in need. That’s why Hoenir had built a relationship with the minister in an attempt to do something about the corrupt royalty of this country.

Even that was something forbidden, and Shiro himself had never been interested in how the country would turn out, one way or the other. But, he had a debt to Hoenir he could never hope to repay. That was why he had dealt with the prince, despite his dislike of human interaction.

Just then, a thought occurred to Shiro. *Would the prince’s family, whom he cares so deeply about, really be the sort to knowingly oppress the citizens of this country?* If he knew anything about Herscherik, he knew that the prince would not blindly trust someone just because they were family.

“Does that mean... you actually had fun, Noel?”

“Master Hoenir!” Shiro said, as if to reprimand. He widened his eyes to glare at this adoptive parent.

Usually, Hoenir would have worn a caring smile. Today, he was grinning maniacally.

“That means it’s about time...”

“Master Hoenir...?” Shiro took a step back, having never seen him like this before. Alarm bells clamored in his head, amplifying his nervousness. Still, the other part of him that refused to doubt Hoenir shut down his fears.

“The prince has become as important to you as I am, or nearly so. Isn’t that true?” Hoenir said, mockingly, in a lower tone than normal.

Shiro took another step back. “What are you...?”



“My little Noel... My dear little Noel.”

As soon as Shiro saw that formulas had materialized around Hoenir, his body stiffened like electricity was running through it. Without even being able to scream, he fell to the ground. *A Manipulation spell...?* A Magic that didn't belong to him invaded his body, robbing him of his control over it. Manipulation magic spells were rarely successful; moreover, although Hoenir had more Magic than most, Shiro's Magic Within far exceeded his. It didn't make sense that Shiro would fall victim to his spell so easily. Was there someone else here with more Magic than Shiro? *No*, Shiro thought. They were the only people in the entire cathedral.

My dear little Noel. The phrase echoed in Shiro's head. And then, he finally realized something he had never wanted to know.

Curses were one of the least powerful Manipulation spells, but only in terms of immediate results. If cast over time, and repeatedly, their effect would gradually increase. If one was cast over a course of years, it was virtually undiscoverable. The effect would strengthen with the use of a particular object or word as a medium.

That included a person's name.

When Shiro was first taken from his birth parents, Hoenir had given him a name. When asked what his name was, having forgotten the name his parents had first given him, Shiro had simply answered “Monster.” Hoenir had responded by naming him “Noel.”

A curse could be activated by writing down the medium word, in addition to speaking it out loud. When Shiro was away from Hoenir for a time, staying at the main branch of the Church, he had received a letter from Hoenir at least once a week.

All of them had begun with “My dear, little Noel.”

Ever since their first meeting, the person Shiro credited with saving his life had been cursing him. When used in conjunction with a curse, Manipulation magic became much more successful.

The only person Shiro trusted in the entire world had been lying to him all

along. That realization was enough to strip Shiro of his purpose in life, sending him spiraling down into a pit of hopelessness.

“Sleep well, my dear little Noel.” While Hoenir’s voice sounded kind, there was no real emotion behind it.

“Mister Shiro!” Just before his consciousness was forcibly robbed from him, Shiro could almost hear the prince call to him in his mind.

Ordering his men to take his unconscious boy away, Hoenir let out a long sigh. Manipulation spells all required a great deal of Magic, as well as an intricate formula. Cursing his puppet over the course of years had been an ordeal, and controlling him on the spot had been even more exhausting. Soon, however, all of his efforts would bear fruit.

Hoenir knelt and bowed to the statue of Saint Ferris. This saint was the hero who united the world during the New Dawn Era and ascended to godhood. He represented peace among the gods, and Hoenir had worshiped Saint Ferris all his life with hardened devotion.

“All in His holy name,” Hoenir said in his usual calm tone. Still, a veil of madness clouded his eyes—enough to make anyone watching quake in terror.

Chapter Seven: Jeanne, the Poison, and Schemes Twining

A week after the assault in the castle town, Herscherik was hosting a guest.

Jeanne, having been shown to the indoor greenhouse where they usually had tea, bowed deeply in gratitude. “I cannot thank Your Highness enough for saving us,” she said, sounding rather nervous.

Herscherik answered with his usual smile, “I’m sorry that such a dreadful thing happened to you. Please, take a seat.”

As Herscherik’s request was met by Oran pulling back a chair for her, Jeanne gingerly took her place at the table. “Were those men after Your Highness’ life...?”

“It seems so. Although I wasn’t given all the details...” Herscherik said with a chuckle. His answer wasn’t entirely honest—it was true that they’d been after him, but he did know the ins and outs of the incident. While he wasn’t allowed to attend himself, both Oran and Marx had been present at the interrogation.

Oran’s report had only managed to put more on Herscherik’s table. The attackers had no recollection of why they attacked Herscherik, nor who had hired them. They each claimed that their memory for the past few days were hazy, and they had felt as though they were sleepwalking when they attacked Herscherik. After an examination, they’d found evidence of memory alteration and brainwashing through Mind Manipulation magic. At the end of the day, since the attackers had been manipulated and no one had actually been hurt in the actual attack, they were sent to the Judicial department in charge of criminal trials.

“Is Violetta not with you today?”

“My sister is not feeling well today and has remained at the manor. Forgive me for calling alone.” She bowed once more.

“If that was all, you might have sent someone,” Herscherik said, visibly

concerned that Jeanne coming all this way on her own might be viewed with suspicion.

Jeanne produced a box. “I’ve come to deliver this. A token of gratitude from my sister, for Your Highness’ protection of her.” Jeanne opened the box to reveal a cupcake decorated with cocoa and nuts. The finely-baked cupcake looked like a beautiful little hill coated in chocolate.

The sweet scent tickled Herscherik’s nose as a smile spread across his face. “Wow, it looks amazing! Schwarz? Tea, please,” he gleefully asked.

“Right away.” Kuro began preparing a pot of tea.

“Your Highness...” Jeanne handed over a second box, smaller than the first. “Please use these.”

“What are they?”

“Tea leaves I had imported from the Principality. They’re quite difficult to find anywhere in our own country.”

Herscherik took the box, which was small enough to fit in both of his palms. The gold and jewel decoration indicated its value. “Are you sure?” he asked. “This must have been expensive.”

“I would like nothing more than for Your Highness to enjoy the tea... A small token of *my* gratitude.”

“Then, I’ll gladly take it.” Herscherik handed the tea to Kuro.

Kuro asked Jeanne for the proper measurements and steeping time, and speedily poured the drink.

The cup of amber tea was placed before Herscherik, filling the room with a vibrant scent. Herscherik took a sip and found it was far less bitter than the tea he was used to, and refreshing as well. “It has such a different aroma from the tea around here. Very invigorating, too. It’s delicious!” He smiled.

“It is...” Jeanne’s expression hardened.

“Miss Jeanne? Are you feeling all right?”

“Y-Yes, I am.”

“If you say so... But don’t say that just for my sake,” Herscherik said with gentle concern.

Jeanne nodded, averting his gaze.

That made Herscherik even more concerned. “Maybe you should return to the manor at once and rest...? Oh, I see!” Herscherik clapped his hands at the revelation. He didn’t notice Jeanne’s shoulders twitch as he reached for the chocolate-coated cupcake. “You want to tell Violetta how I liked the cake! Then, without further ado...” Herscherik opened his mouth wide, about to take a heaping bite out of the cake.

Jeanne watched the next few moments pass in excruciating slowness, as if the god of time himself had intervened. What should have happened in the blink of an eye instead seemed to move ever so slowly as the cupcake approached Herscherik’s mouth.

“No...!” Jeanne leaped out of her chair just as the cupcake was about to touch Herscherik’s lips, smacking it out of his hands. She proceeded to smash the box that had carried the cupcake onto the floor. “No... I can’t... No...” Jeanne continued to mutter as she threw Herscherik’s tea cup to the floor. Then, she ran over to the serving table and smashed the tea pot and box onto the ground, too. When she finally stopped, her shoulders rising and falling, only the sound of her frenzied panting echoed through the greenhouse.

“Miss Jeanne,” a calm voice called.

Jeanne didn’t hear it. She stood there aghast, as the past week she had spent making preparations according to her father’s orders flashed before her eyes. *What... What have I done?!* She had no idea if betraying her father or Herscherik would be worse.

According to her father’s command, she had come prepared to assassinate the little prince. She had planted two separate poisons in the cake and the tea. On their own, either was harmless. But when combined, the two poisons would slowly stop the victim’s heart. Since this poison was almost unknown in this country and it took so long to take effect, this method had always escaped notice. Jeanne had taken many lives using this very tool.

Until the previous day, she had always convinced herself that there was no

other way to protect her sister and herself, just as it had always been. But when she saw Herscherik wearing the same kind smile he had always shown her, Jeanne's resolve wavered. In that long moment when Herscherik was about to eat the cake after drinking the tea, her wavering resolve had finally crumbled to pieces. She tightened her fist. Despite the pain of her nails digging into her palm, she couldn't loosen her grip.

A set of warm hands wrapped themselves around her clenched fist. "Miss Jeanne. Calm down... Please?" a gentle voice called to her.

"Your... Highness?" She saw the prince, so much smaller than she was, looking up at her. Jeanne retook her seat at Herscherik's gesture.

He stood there, staring straight into her eyes. All the while, Herscherik held her hands in his. "I know everything."

"What...?" Jeanne could almost *hear* the color draining from her face.

Herscherik held her hands tighter in reassurance. "Kuro switched out the tea, so I haven't taken any poison. I trusted that you'd stop me before I ate the cake, too."

"How...?"

"How did I find out? Because my butler is overqualified for his job." They already knew that one of the Marquis Barbosse's men had acquired two very rare poisons by underhanded means. Both of them were almost unknown within the kingdom, so Kuro might have been the only one to make the connection—along with the fact that a merchant who frequented the Barbosse manor had just brought in a rare and expensive tea. That's why, in preparation for this day, Kuro had acquired a serving of tea leaves through some of his own connections.

"Besides," Herscherik added, "the cupcake was a little too neat to be Violetta's work." He didn't believe for a second that Violetta, whose cookies were still a little misshapen and overbaked every time, could have improved her baking skills enough to produce a nearly flawless cupcake in the matter of days. Of course, he hadn't expected that Jeanne would force Violetta to make the to-be-poisoned cake, either.

“Why...” *Why did you believe I was going to stop you?* That was Jeanne’s real question. Until the very last second, she had been completely determined to kill Herscherik.

Herscherik chuckled. His men of service had warned him against this plan, too. Still, the reason he’d been so confident... was that he *wanted* to believe Jeanne. “A hunch, I guess? I didn’t want to be wrong about you.” He had no other reason to give. It was the same answer that had provoked such exasperation from his men.

A teardrop fell from Jeanne’s hazel eye, which set off an uncontrollable flood of sobs. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry...” The tears rolled down her cheeks and off of her chin, wetting her hands and Herscherik’s, still wrapped around hers.

Herscherik stroked her hair as if he was comforting a child.

After some time, when Jeanne finally stopped crying, Kuro handed her a damp towel. Herscherik let go of her hand, so she timidly took the towel and pressed it against her eyes. It felt cool to the touch, and Jeanne could feel herself starting to calm down a bit. As she did so, she recalled the fact that she had just cried in front of Herscherik, and then he’d held her hands and stroked her hair, of all things. He’d sat there stroking her hair the entire time she was crying, even. Jeanne couldn’t even remember her own mother doing something like that for her. She could feel her cheeks growing red again.

“I’m mortified by my unsightly display...” Jeanne said, without raising her eyes. She was surprised by how faint her own voice was.

“Don’t worry about it.” Herscherik’s voice was as calm as it always was, which somehow reassured Jeanne. Her relief, however, dissipated at his statement that followed: “Miss Jeanne. I also know what you’ve done in the past.” Jeanne snapped her head up to find Herscherik’s eyes lit up with sincere emotion.

Kuro had gone through Jeanne’s background with a fine-tooth comb and told Herscherik everything he found—how she’d carried secret letters and messages on Barbosse’s command and even eliminated her father’s political enemies by killing them or incapacitating them with poison. Herscherik doubted anyone else would have suspected the Marquis’ daughter in those incidents, even had the nobles under the minister’s thumb not actively concealed them.

Jeanne lowered her gaze once again and tightened the grip on the towel. “I have... no defense to offer for myself.” It was entirely possible that she would be sentenced to death for her actions. Jeanne was fully aware that the crimes she had committed in her life thus far would have warranted that punishment. Her hands tightened in her lap.

“Miss Jeanne.” Herscherik held her hands again, as if to say *Everything will be okay*. “I want to know more about the life you’ve lived.”

Jeanne took a moment before slowly beginning to recount her life’s story. “My mother used to serve my father’s wife. I grew up in the red-light district.” She had never told this story to anyone. No one else knew of her origins, other than Barbosse himself and perhaps his closest confidants.

Jeanne’s mother, a merchant’s daughter who had been an attendant to Barbosse’s wife at the time, had been approached by Barbosse, who’d taken a liking to her looks. They slept together, and Jeanne was the result. When Barbosse’s jealous wife discovered the affair, she threw Jeanne’s mother out, with only a handful of cash to tide her over.

That money had allowed her to give birth and survive for a short time after that, but it didn’t last long. Having been disowned by her family at this point, Jeanne’s mother had no options for reputable employment with a newborn in tow. She ended up in the red-light district.

There wasn’t a day in Jeanne’s life that she could remember when her mother did not scream at her. She still vividly remembered her beautiful mother shouting at her with furrowed brows. “Useless!” “If only you were never born...!” She was reminded of it every day. But, after each tirade, her mother had always looked depressed, and it truly seemed as though she was more hurt by her own outbursts than Jeanne was.

In hindsight, Jeanne understood—after her mother’s fall from grace, she had ended up in a red-light district after serving a marquess. If she hadn’t had someone else to blame for it, her mother might not have been able to carry on. Jeanne didn’t know if her mother had ever loved her, but she did feel grateful that her mother had at least raised her. Even as she spent her days showering Jeanne with insults, she never let her daughter go hungry. And then, five years

ago, her mother had died from an illness.

“After I lost my mother, I was all alone. I looked for a job so I could survive, but not even the brothels would hire me, whether it be for my age or appearance.” Poverty had left Jeanne little more than skin and bones, and she would never be as beautiful as her mother had been. In desperation she had even taken to standing on a street corner, but due to her age and inexperience she attracted no legitimate clientele.

“When I felt as though all was lost, I remembered what my mother told me about my father... so I went to see him.” Based on some of her mother’s last words to her, Jeanne had called on her father. While her mother had sold almost everything she had left from the marquis’ house, she had held on to a ring with the Barbosse seal that Jeanne’s father had given her on a whim.

With this ring in hand, Jeanne knocked on the door of the Marquis’ manor. “My father accepted me, in exchange for raising my sister and obeying his every command.” She had spent every day after that taking care of her sister and desperately learning to fit in with the nobility, terrified that she would be kicked to the streets at any moment. She did every heinous deed her father commanded, because she was convinced that there was no other way to survive.

Thinking back on it now, there had been other paths open to her. She could have knocked on the door of an orphanage instead of her father’s house, or even run away once she learned what her father wanted her to do. But, Jeanne had given up on looking for a way out by that point and had chosen the path of least resistance. She realized now that she had committed all of those crimes as her father dictated simply because she wanted to survive as easily as possible.

Seeing that Jeanne’s thoughts were making her look even more distressed, Herscherik asked, “Why didn’t you kill me?”

“I...” Jeanne stammered.

Herscherik did not let up. “What will happen to Violetta, now?”

“I don’t know, but...!” Violetta was the only one who had ever shown her a genuine smile. She was the only one who cared about Jeanne without an ulterior motive, and she even looked up to her as a sister—despite Jeanne only

being a *half*-sister born in a red-light district. Violetta had been the only thing that ever truly mattered to Jeanne. *In the end, though, I was just using Vivi as an excuse.*

After convincing herself that everything she'd done was all to protect her dear Violetta, Jeanne had put her own emotions—her feeling that she didn't want to kill Herscherik—above her sister. Thinking about it now, Jeanne's own actions seemed so selfish, pathetic, and slimy to her. The tears returned, falling on her hands that were still clutching the towel.

"That was a mean thing for me to say. I'm sorry... Don't cry, Miss Jeanne." Herscherik placed his hands on hers once again. Jeanne brushed back her polished-copper hair, her hazel eyes meeting Herscherik's. Seeing that she was looking at him now, he added, "Miss Jeanne, you know lies come in many shapes."

"What?" Jeanne asked, taken aback by the sudden turn in conversation.

Herscherik paid no mind to that as he continued. "People lie in all sorts of situations." To fill their pockets, to protect themselves, to protect others... "Out of all the different kinds of lies, there's only one I'd never want anyone to tell."

When Herscherik had first met Jeanne, he felt like she was as tense as could be, always watching her surroundings. She'd always been overly sensitive to the gaze of those around her, constantly double checking where she was standing. Even as she protected her own place in the world, it seemed like she was trying to convince herself that there truly was nowhere else for her to go. She had suppressed her own feelings and deluded herself all this time, in order to keep herself convinced.

A spiral like that only had one place to go. "If you keep lying to yourself, your heart will ache more and more... until it finally dies." Herscherik couldn't help but think how sad it would be for her heart to finally grow cold. That was no kind of life to live.

"Your Highness..." Tears began to pool in Jeanne's eyes once again.

Feeling remorseful for making Jeanne cry again, Herscherik stroked her silky copper hair, which felt nice on his hand. "You don't have to fight alone anymore." He pulled Jeanne closer to him and let out a chuckle, realizing that

she couldn't help but lean over to put her head on his shoulder, since he was so much smaller than she was even when seated.

As she cried, Jeanne couldn't help but wonder why she couldn't stop doing so in stop of Herscherik. She had never shed a single tear in front of anyone before. *I think I understand now...* As she wetted Herscherik's shoulder, Jeanne finally realized her own feelings about the prince.

Jeanne patted at her swollen eyes with another wet towel that Kuro had prepared. "Thank you, Your Highness." She bowed her head; the poisoned cupcake and tea had been removed, and a new set of tea had arrived.

As he sipped on his cup of (non-poisonous) rare tea, Herscherik asked Jeanne, "What now?"

"I won't lie to myself anymore," Jeanne answered with conviction. She was no longer a frightened child, after all. "I must atone for my actions. I would turn myself in now, if I didn't..." Jeanne paused for a moment before continuing with renewed resolve, "...have something I must do. I swear that I will be of use to Your Highness."

Herscherik's expression clouded. "Something dangerous?" He didn't want Jeanne to just go directly from being Barbosse's pawn to being *his*.

"Your Highness needn't concern himself with me. I've gotten out of a few tough scrapes myself," she cheerfully answered.

"Miss Jeanne..." Herscherik muttered. Her expression was lively now. A weight had visibly been lifted from her shoulders.

Jeanne's expression became more serious. "Could Your Highness call me Jeanne? And... may I call Your Highness 'Prince Herscherik'?"

"What?" Herscherik said, completely taken aback.

Still, Jeanne continued, "And... If I ever atone for my crimes... Will Your Highness promise to keep me by his side?"

"Huh?" Herscherik replied, still utterly dumbfounded.

Blushing, Jeanne stared Herscherik down. "I want to serve at your side, Prince Herscherik—at any cost. Please, I implore you," Jeanne pleaded, clasping her

hands in front of her chest with teary eyes.

Herscherik felt like his heart was starting to beat a little faster. “Y-Yes, of course. And you can call me anything you like.”

A joyful smile spread across Jeanne’s face.

Herscherik couldn’t help but feel like the temperature of the room, which was kept steady at all times, had gotten warmer.

After seeing Jeanne out and returning to Herscherik’s room in the outer quarters, there was a strange silence among the prince and his men.

“You’re blushing to your ears,” Kuro began.

Herscherik had been uncharacteristically flustered. Now, he rushed to put his hands over his ears.

Seeing Herscherik’s reaction, Oran came in for the second attack. “So you’re into older girls, Hersch.” His master shot him a death glare, which Oran brushed off with a laugh.

“Her connection with the Minister aside, Lady Violetta is certainly cute—and smart, too. I know they’re both your type, Hersch, but remember... you can only marry one of them.”

Herscherik could feel his body temperature rising more with Kuro’s comment. “Sh-Sh-Shut up about it, already!” Herscherik turned his back in an attempt to shield himself from any further teasing, which seemed inevitable.

Herscherik had no interest in romance, but he also wasn’t oblivious enough to mistake the meaning behind Jeanne’s request and expression for anything else. This had never happened to Herscherik—nor Ryoko—ever before. This was the first time anyone had ever sincerely professed their feelings for him at all. While Ryoko had been on the receiving end of numerous otome game characters’ confessions, Herscherik’s heart was beating quite a bit faster right now than Ryoko’s ever had.

Late that night, Jeanne entered the hidden office in the manor where she lived. This was a secret room only known to a handful of people; it contained

documents, books, and all sorts of things Barbosse didn't want to have out in the open. In fact, Jeanne had discovered her signature combination of poisons from one of the books in this very office. As quietly as possible, with nothing but the tiniest ball of light she could produce to guide her, Jeanne searched through the piles of documents.

She didn't yet see anything that would help Herscherik. *What kind of information would Prince Herscherik need...?* Would it be evidence of her father's crimes?

No, there's something he needs even more than that. With this in mind, Jeanne looked around the room, which did contain some material related to her father's crimes—but no definitive proof. Barbosse was a careful man. He wouldn't leave anything that could destroy him just lying around, no matter how closely kept, where anyone else could find it.

Besides, Jeanne knew that he always gave incriminating evidence to his accomplices in order to protect himself. He always calculated his profit and risk, and was ready to throw any of his supporters into the fire to save his own skin. Such was the philosophy of the Marquis Barbosse. Jeanne wondered if her cunning father would really leave behind *any* evidence she could find.

With a quiet sigh, she stood up. Just as she began walking towards another spot in the room, she felt something under her foot; she crouched down and peeled back the carpet to find a patch of flooring that looked slightly different from its surroundings. Jeanne easily lifted the floorboards and peered beneath them to find a safe with a dial lock. *What's in there...?*

The safe wasn't guarded by any magic barriers. Jeanne wondered if it contained dirty money or something like that before another thought crossed her mind. The benefits of a magic barrier were mostly its defense and the fact that an alarm could be set to go off when the barrier was broken. However, the barrier itself would be a glaring target for anyone who could detect magic, signifying that anything inside the ward was worth protecting. Safes with magical barriers could be assumed to contain more valuable things than those without them. Additionally, a *hidden* safe without a magical barrier had significantly less chance of being discovered at all.

Jeanne felt her heart race as she put her ear up against the safe and began turning the dial. Back in the red-light district, one of her mother's regulars had particularly sticky fingers. While he waited for her mother, he'd taught Jeanne all sorts of thievery tricks. One of them had been on how to crack a dial-locked safe.

The lock finally opened with a click. The safe contained several scrolls and documents. Jeanne removed each one and read through them, then closed her eyes for a moment. *Father, I always knew you were...* Carefully, Jeanne removed every single document from the safe and went to work.

Once she was done, she replaced the documents, floorboards, and carpet exactly as she had found them, and left the room. *I have to notify Prince Herscherik at once. Then there's Vivi...* Her mind raced as she walked down the hall, resisting the powerful urge to break into a run. Then, someone stepped into her path.

"What are you doing up at this hour?"

"Just getting some fresh air, Father. I couldn't sleep." Jeanne felt a twinge of panic. She knew she had a very low chance of running into her father at this hour. Her luck must be *really* rotten.

"Has the prince been taken care of?"

"Not yet... But there will be more opportunities," Jeanne answered with a business-like tone, trying to maintain a calm and collected façade.

"I see... Speaking of, I need you to do something for me. It's urgent."

"Understood," Jeanne answered her father as she usually did.

Violetta did not like her father. She had always feared his large stature and intimidating presence, and never truly wanted to see him. But this time, it was different. Her aversion to her father was but a small obstacle when she wanted to find her dear sister.

Now that she stood in front of his office, Violetta stopped. Through the slim crack in the door, she heard a voice that didn't belong to her father. *Does he have a guest?* In a decidedly unladylike decision, Violetta quietly eavesdropped.

Apparently, her father had *multiple* guests over.

Her father's voice came through the crack. "Will the knights and the constabulary be quiet tonight?"

"Arrangements have already been made."

"Good. What is that archbishop up to...? Ah, but it'll be a small price to pay for finally getting rid of that pesky Seventh Prince."

Violetta froze at hearing those words that should have never come out of the mouth of a royal advisor. She couldn't process what her father was saying. His guests, however, chimed in with agreements.

"About your daughter, Your Excellency..."

"You mean the brat Jeanne? There's no proof that she's actually my child. She was useful enough and it kept her quiet, but her time is about to end. There's no value left there."

Violetta nearly screamed at her father's words, clapping her hands over her mouth to stifle the noise. She knew that Jeanne was only her half-sister, but she had never once doubted that Jeanne—who even had the same eyes as her—was her real sister. Even if Jeanne wasn't related to her by blood, she was much more dear to her than many of her closer relatives. Violetta's father was always working and never paid her any mind; her oldest brother always looked down on her; her other brother she had never met and didn't even know where he was right now.

"The Church will take care of her, along with the prince. But keep up your preparations for the events that will follow. This country is mine," Barbosse declared.

Violetta faltered a few steps back, still covering her mouth. She knew that "the Seventh Prince" referred to Herscherik. And if her father was serious, he was going to kill her sister along with him. Then, despite only being a mid-ranking aristocrat, he declared that this whole country was his.

No... Violetta fled the scene without making a sound, running back to her room. *What can I...? What can I do?!* Thoughts whirled in her mind, but only one figure remained clear. *Prince Herscherik!* With that thought, Violetta

grabbed her coat and ran out of her room.

She left out of the back gate to avoid being spotted, heading directly for the castle. *I have to help Jeanne and Prince Herscherik! But how?!* She didn't even know if a child her age would be allowed into the castle alone. Her sister had come with her every other time and dealt with all of the paperwork and such. She couldn't disclose that she was the daughter to the Marquis Barbosse, either, for fear they would alert him.

Violetta proceeded through the main street, blending into the crowd. Since she had always traveled to the castle by carriage before, she had never realized how far the castle actually was from the manor. She still had a long way to go.

Then, Violetta noticed the crowd part, and a carriage approached them from behind. The people of the castle town always knew to make way on the street whenever a carriage of high status passed through—they'd always parted for Violetta's carriage like this, too. She turned to look at the carriage, and as soon as she recognized the crest, she jumped out of the parting crowd... but tripped over something underfoot and crashed to the ground. The coachman noticed her and yanked the reins. The horses neighed in protest, but stopped in their tracks.

"How dare you, girl?! Don't you see the emblem there?!" the coachman shouted.

Violetta pushed herself up on her elbows and shouted back at the coachman, unafraid, "Please help me!"

"Nonsense! Make way!"

"I beg you, please help!" Violetta groveled, rubbing her forehead on the ground.

Irritated, the coachman climbed down and approached Violetta to move her out of the way.

"Hold it." The carriage door opened and a young boy stepped out. He gave the coachman a sharp glare. "You dare turn away a little girl, a citizen of this country, begging for help *in tears?*"

The remaining two passengers of the carriage passed the coachman as he

turned his head to and fro in confusion and helped Violetta up.

“Are you all right?”

“Dry your tears. Here.” A girl, one of the two other passengers, handed Violetta her handkerchief. When Violetta didn’t take it, the girl wiped her tears away as the other, a boy, patted the dirt off of her clothes.

The first boy to exit the carriage joined them after his conversation with the coachman. “Wait, aren’t you...?” he said, apparently recognizing Violetta.

Violetta snapped out of it, and clung to the girl. “I beg all of you, please let me see Prince Herscherik!”

The royal triplets—Cecily, Arya, and Reinette—shared a look.

Herscherik was about to welcome an unexpected guest.

“Sorry to barge in like this, Hersch.”

“What’s the matter, Mark?” Herscherik asked, having hurriedly gathered up the papers scattered all over his room after Kuro had notified him of his brother’s arrival moments earlier. He didn’t want Marx to worry about him, at least not more than he already did. That being said, he and Oran had simply ended up throwing all of the papers into the adjoining room.

“You’re up to something again,” Marx said as he gave Herscherik one look.

“No...? Why do you say that?” Herscherik desperately denied what must have been obvious, letting his gaze wander about the room.

Marx sighed in exasperation. “We’ll talk about that later. We have more pressing matters at the moment. Come in, Will.”

William entered at Marx’s call. He had always had a cool handsomeness about him, but his aura seemed especially icy today.

“William?” Herscherik had never had William actually come into his room, and had no idea why he would choose to do so now.

With a scowl, William answered, “Eutel’s gotten worse.”

“What?” As William’s words sank into his mind, Herscherik could almost hear

the color drain from his face. “Big brother... Eutel...?”

“Archbishop Hoenir was scheduled to treat him today, but didn’t show. We tried to contact him and were turned away. Then, he demanded that *you* be sent to the Grand Cathedral if we wanted to save Eutel... And that we need to give you this.”

Kuro took the letter, opened the seal, and handed it to Herscherik, who gave it a quick read. He could feel his expression hardening as he did. It was a simple letter, only demanding Herscherik to come to a particular chapel within the Grand Cathedral by the designated time that night, accompanied with no one but his men of service. If he sent a member of the knight’s order or a team of constables, the letter threatened, both Shiro—who was supposed to be on *their* side—and Jeanne, surprisingly enough, would die.

The one thing Herscherik could infer from the letter was that Shiro was clearly only a pawn of the Church, rather than a willing servant of the organization. While his curiosity about Shiro had finally been satisfied, it didn’t make Herscherik feel any better.

I didn’t expect the Church to go straight to brute force... He had anticipated that the Church was about to make some sort of move, which was exactly why he had been preparing to deal with it—but they had been far quicker than he’d expected.

But why would they take Jeanne too? Oh, no... An ominous feeling crept up Herscherik’s spine, further hardening his expression.

“You knew that the archbishop contacted us because he was after something, didn’t you?” William’s cold tone brought Herscherik out of his pondering.

“Yes, I did...” Herscherik answered, after a long beat. He knew that, for whatever reason, the Church had an ulterior motive for getting close to the royal family. He didn’t believe that the Church was solely there to treat Eutel for a second.

“You knew... and didn’t tell us.”

“Because I—”

“I don’t want to hear it,” William sharply cut him off.

Herscherik swallowed the words that were going to follow: *I didn't want to put you in danger*. Marx, who had gotten involved in the drug trafficking ordeal, was already in a much more dangerous position than before. Herscherik felt he couldn't afford to put his family in harm's way any more for his own goals. The more they knew, the more dangerous it would become for them. When he had gotten Marx involved, he had only done so because he saw no way around it.

"Your Highness!" Oran raised his voice in defense of Herscherik. Both Oran and Kuro knew that since Herscherik had discovered the Church's approach, he had been more anxious than ever, and was always afraid of worrying his siblings. Herscherik's kindness had backfired this time, but Oran still believed that it wasn't right to blame him.

"This is a matter for the royal family. Stay out of it, servant." William silenced Oran with a sharp glare.

Oran turned to Marx for a helping hand, but he only shook his head.

"Yes or no, Herscherik?"

"I'm sorry..."

"Will your 'sorry' cure Eutel? Or get us out of this situation?"

Herscherik bit his tongue. As his brother said, apologies wouldn't make anything better.

"You think you can handle everything by yourself, do you?" William added.

"No, I don't!" Herscherik knew how powerless he was, more than anybody else. "I...!" Herscherik was nearing his limit, his face twisted with the effort of holding back tears.

Then, he was interrupted by the door opening. "I think we've bullied Herscherik enough, Will."

Herscherik froze at the voice, then slowly turned towards the source—only to see someone who should not have been standing there. "Brother...?" William had only just said that Eutel had gotten worse, but Eutel was now standing in the doorway, looking better than he had when Herscherik had gone to visit him last.

“I know you’re worried about your dear littlest brother, Will, but it doesn’t help that your face seems to only show the opposite of whatever emotion you’re feeling.” Eutel shrugged.

Herscherik ran to him. “Eutel!”

“But—” Eutel lightly smacked Herscherik on the forehead. “I agree with Will,” he said, patting Herscherik’s hair. “Trust your family, Herscherik. Especially Will, who’s so high maintenance that he keeps moping around because you never play with him.”

“Shut up, Eutel,” William said with a huff.

Many questions flew through Herscherik’s mind, but the first was obvious. “Are you all right, Eutel?!” His brother had previously been so ill that he could barely stand. Now, he was not only standing but walking completely on his own

“Hm? Not *all* right, but I’m doing fine,” he continued as he kept stroking Herscherik’s hair. “I’ve known for a long time that my growth wouldn’t catch up to my Magic. I’m fine if I regularly use magic or put my Magic into items.” Eutel added that his forte was Puppeteering spells.

“Most people in your state *can’t* use magic at all, by the way. You’re the outlier,” Marx said.

Herscherik turned to William, who was nodding in agreement. “Then why were you bed bound and being treated by the Church?”

Eutel shrugged. “I’ve never been the *healthiest* person. When I was resting from a summer cold, I noticed that you were up to a few things, Herscherik.”

It had all begun when Eutel was using a form of wind magic to practice his Elemental casting and expend some of his own overflowing Magic Within by eavesdropping on conversations throughout the outer quarters. While the Royal Quarters was protected by magical barriers, none of them protected it from magic cast *within* the quarters. By coincidence, Eutel had overheard a conversation between Herscherik and his men.

“Then, the Church approached me, having gotten a tip from who-knows-where. You seemed to be struggling against them, so I thought it’d be a perfect opportunity to keep an eye on them.” Eutel added that he hadn’t told

Herscherik to prevent him from making any moves that would tip the Church off. However, he also clarified that he would have told Herscherik—if he had come clean.

“I see...” Herscherik said. “Then, you’re safe. Good...”

“You’re more worried about me than the Church? I can’t be mad at you when I see your adorable smile,” Eutel chuckled, producing a small bag from his pocket. “That arch-fake-bishop gave me this on his last visit. A drug that would make me healthy... according to him, anyway.”

“A drug?!” Herscherik couldn’t help but think of the drug that circulated the capital two years prior, which did have the effect of physically strengthening the user. However, the end result was the opposite of healthy, and he told Eutel so.

“Thought so.” Eutel shrugged. “I never took any of it, since it seemed a little too good to be true. Glad I didn’t. Pass this on to your Spellcaster of service, Mark?”

“I’m sure this will help with that antidote. And this definitively links the Church to the drug, Hersch.”

Herscherik nodded. The incidents two years prior didn’t leave them with enough evidence to actually prosecute anyone. Thanks to Eutel, Baron Armin’s last words were proven true.

“Now,” Eutel clapped his hands with a charming smile. “*That’s* threatening royalty. Let’s unleash some knights on the Church, shall we?” Despite his cutesy-looking gesture, his proposal was quite drastic.

“Calm down, Eutel.” William glared at him.

Eutel countered, still smiling, “I’m perfectly calm. Not only did that arch-idiot break the separation of government and Church, but he threatened the life of the royal family. Why would we *ever* send our little brother into an obvious trap, anyway? Let’s get rid of that absolute *joke* of a priest, as soon as possible. For our country’s sake.”

Herscherik felt his perception of Eutel crack and crumble to dust. *I thought he was the soft-spoken, sickly prince... Turns out he’s the spitfire with a dark side...* Although Eutel was ruthless in his delivery, everything he said was logically

sound. Herscherik swore right then that he'd never get on Eutel's bad side. He knew he wouldn't stand a chance against his brother in any kind of debate.

"We're not talking about some vermin here, Eutel..." William said, rubbing his temple as if he was suffering a migraine.

Eutel simply answered, "I'd prefer vermin. They don't scheme, and they're easier to get rid of."

"Excuse me? Knock, knock," Reinette peeked through the door that had been left open, still dressed in his academy uniform. He looked around the room, then frowned at the sight of Eutel. "It's always scary to see Eutel's *true colors*."

Eutel smiled. "What was that, Reinette?"

Reinette started. "Nothing, I'm sorry."

"Something wrong, Reinette?" Marx asked.

Reinette only answered with a serious look and stepped into the room, followed by Arya and Cecily.

Herscherik's eyes widened as he saw the figure standing between the two other triplets. "Violetta?"

Violetta ran to Herscherik and kept that momentum as she embraced him, which would have knocked Herscherik straight onto his back if it wasn't for William quickly stepping in.

Herscherik thanked his brother before speaking to Violetta, who just continued to cry in his arms. "What's wrong, Violetta? Isn't Jeanne with you today?"

As soon as she heard her sister's name, even more tears rolled down Violetta's cheeks.

"Jeanne...! Jeanne...!" She sobbed.

After consoling Violetta into explaining what she'd heard, Herscherik gazed up at the ceiling. Violetta's words showed that the letter from the Church was legitimate, and Herscherik's bad feeling had come to fruition. *Barbosse is ready to cut off his own daughter so easily...? And I knew he had to be connected with the Church.* The silver lining was that it sounded more like an alliance of

convenience rather than a true alliance.

“Don’t cry, Violetta. We’ll save Jeanne, I promise,” Herscherik said with a gentle smile. He then gave Violetta to Cecily before turning to his brothers. “I’ll go, exactly as requested.”

“Even if we can’t mobilize the knight’s order or constabulary, we can at least use the royal guards,” Marx said. “You won’t even take them?” Even under the minister’s watch, they could command the royal guards with the king’s direct order.

Herscherik shook his head. “If they see the guards with me, they may hurt Jeanne or Mister Shiro. I need to prioritize their safety.”

“Shiro is the adopted son of the archbishop, and this Jeanne is the daughter of the Marquis Barbosse, right?” Marx asked.

Everyone in the room except Violetta understood the implication. Herscherik understood that all of them heard of their family’s tragedy from their father. Volf Barbosse had taken the lives of the previous king, their uncles, and their oldest sister, disguising the murder as a natural illness. Marx was asking if they really *needed* to save the daughter of their nemesis and the adoptive son of the archbishop, who was arguably the cause of this entire situation.

“It doesn’t matter who their parents are. Mister Shiro, Jeanne, and Violetta are all people I care about,” Herscherik answered William. Were children responsible for the crimes of their parents? Herscherik didn’t believe so. After getting to know them, even for just a few months, he couldn’t force himself to be so heartless—nor did he want to.

Marx gave up on arguing with his younger brother—not that he expected Herscherik to listen to his advice in the first place. “All right. You have one hour. If we don’t hear from you for an hour after you go into the cathedral, William and I are going in with the royal guards.” This was as far as Marx was willing to compromise.

“Yes. I’m sorry about this.” Herscherik bowed to his family, then glanced at his men of service. “Kuro, Oran. Prepare the carriage, please. We’ll drop Violetta off, then head to the Grand Cathedral.”

“Herscherik,” Cecily countered. “Won’t it be dangerous to send Violetta back to the minister? I vote for keeping her here in the castle.” Cecily held Violetta, stroking her hair to calm her down.

Herscherik shook his head. “It’s more dangerous to keep Violetta here. That may make Barbosse suspicious and he may come to take her away.” He couldn’t bear to mention the possibility that Barbosse could cut her off as he had done to Jeanne. Not in front of Violetta, at any rate. “I have an idea. I’ll make sure Barbosse won’t be able to touch her, even if he suspects something. Please, leave it to me.”

Cecily reluctantly agreed. Now that an agreement had been reached, Herscherik’s men exited the room to make preparations. Marx took William to see their father.

“I’ll be in my room, since I’m supposed to be bedridden. Won’t go too well if they find out I’m not. Oh, and I’ll draft up a formal declaration against the Church,” said Eutel. While it seemed extremely unlikely that the entirety of the Church was involved in this incident, they couldn’t rule out the possibility that the whole hierarchy was connected to Hoenir and had orchestrated the whole thing. Not even the Church could disregard a formal declaration, which would also serve as a warning if things went further south. “We’ll get dirt on the Church and curry some favor with any factions that oppose Hoenir.” Eutel gave a much-too-innocent smile and left the room. The only ones left in the room were Herscherik, Violetta, and the triplets.

“Speaking of, how did you find out what I was doing?” Herscherik asked the triplets. Eutel had overheard a conversation with his men, but he hadn’t figured out how the triplets had found out about his operation. But they were still standing there, without even a look of surprise on their faces.

“We don’t know the details like Eutel does, but we knew that you were sneaking out into town,” Reinette declared as if it was nothing.

“That, combined with the rumors and the timing of your little outings made it easy for us to guess what you were up to, Herscherik. Not to mention how often you went out there... *Prince of Light*. Of course I’d recognize my own brother, crossdressing or not,” Arya chuckled.

“We were worried sick every time,” Cecily said, as she sat Violetta (who had stopped crying by now) into her chair and began to prepare some tea. She let out a sigh.

In short, they had seen Herscherik leave the castle for some Fortune Favors the Bold operation, and they knew that the rumors about the Prince of Light were actually about him. They had seen Herscherik crossdress, too. *I think I underestimated my siblings...* If Ryoko’s life counted, Herscherik was over forty years old, which was more than twice the age of his oldest siblings. As a result, he had always seen them as people he had to protect.

But, now that he thought about it, they weren’t children who needed protection all of the time. They matured on their own, thought independently, and chose their own actions. Both William and Eutel had asked Herscherik to trust them. It wasn’t hard to imagine that Marx and the triplets wanted the same from him. “I’m sorry...” Herscherik let out an apology as guilt for how he treated them came rushing in.

“No, we’re looking for a different phrase from you,” Cecily teased as she handed him a cup of tea.

After a moment, Herscherik said, “Cecily, Arya, Reinette. Thank you.”

The triplets answered with three nearly identical smiles.

The sun had gone down, and the street lamps were beginning to light up when a carriage driven by Kuro finally arrived at the Marquis Barbosse’s manor. Oran had ridden his horse alongside the carriage.

“Prince Herscherik!” Barbosse had appeared after receiving word of the party’s arrival while Herscherik had given Violetta a hand to climb down from the carriage. “I’m terribly sorry for Violetta’s behavior...”

“I was simply happy to see her. Wasn’t I, Violetta?”

Violetta nervously looked at Herscherik and held his hand, to which Herscherik returned a gentle smile and a nod. Violetta gave him a nod of her own, and walked away from him to stand beside her father.

Before Barbosse could speak, Herscherik fired the first shot. “Minister

Barbosse, I accept the arrangement to marry Violetta.”

Barbosse’s eyes widened. Evidently, he hadn’t expected this answer. “Are you certain, Your Highness?”

Herscherik met Barbosse’s incredulous look with a smile. “I will be back with official papers at a later date. So...” Herscherik’s expression changed. While his mouth maintained the same smile, his eyes pierced the minister. “If any harm comes to my fiancée, you will be held responsible.”

This wasn’t a simple statement of fact, but a threat. Herscherik assumed that Barbosse would grow suspicious of why she had come to him—in secret, no less—and the minister wouldn’t hesitate to kill even his own young daughter, just as he had with Jeanne. That’s why Herscherik had officially declared Violetta his fiancée. If something happened to her, now engaged to a royal, thorough investigations and severe punishment would follow. Those consequences would be dire even for the most powerful man in the country, regardless of his titles.

This was a clear-cut threat. If any harm would come to Violetta, Barbosse would *not* get away with it.

“Very well...” Barbosse answered.

Herscherik’s glare subsided. “I must be going, now. See you later, Violetta.” He gave her a reassuring smile.

“Yes, Prince Herscherik...”

Herscherik turned around, followed by his men of service. “Shall we?”

“Your wish is our command,” they answered in unison.

Chapter Eight: The Grand Cathedral, the Templar, and Blind Faith

Herscherik climbed out of his carriage in front of the Grand Cathedral, looking up at the massive construction. By day it was a solemn piece of white-stone architecture, but now that it loomed above him in the dark of night, it seemed like an ominous evil lair. It was his enemy's headquarters, after all.

The Grand Cathedral was located on the outskirts of the capital, some distance away from the castle town but close to the late Baron Armin's orphanage—close enough that people from the church could inconspicuously visit the orphanage often under the guise of providing aid. It left Herscherik with a bitter taste in his mouth, assuming that this had been the primary reason they'd taken advantage of the orphanage in the first place.

"It's much larger than I expected," Herscherik simply said.

"It also serves as the headquarters of the Church in Gracis," Kuro chimed in. He had eschewed his all-black spy wear in exchange for his butler's uniform. According to him, this outfit concealed even more weapons. Of course, Herscherik couldn't tell what weapons were hidden where.

Then, Herscherik's curiosity was piqued. "Do either of you believe in a god?"

"None," Kuro immediately answered.

Herscherik chuckled at this expected response and looked to Oran, who had kept his white knight's uniform on. Since the uniform was designed for knights specifically, it didn't inhibit his movement in any way.

"I want to believe that there's a Garden Above after I'm dead," he said. "I guess I have faith in that sense, but not enough to join the Church." The Garden Above was a place where good souls dwelled after their body's death in this world until being reborn into their next life. It was similar to the concept of heaven in Ryoko's world, while the equivalent of hell was called the Darkness Below. "What about you, Hersch?"

“Um...?” Herscherik’s answer was indecisive despite bringing up the question himself. *I didn’t really think about it when I was Ryoko.*

Japan was a country without much attachment to religion when Ryoko was alive. Everyone had a right to choose their own faith, including none at all. Ryoko did not subscribe to any specific religion, though she celebrated Christmas, went to Shinto shrines on occasion, and expected to have a Buddhist funeral like most other Japanese people of her time. She did have an interest in mythology, though.

While Ryoko was an *otaku* spinster with an affinity for the world of fiction, she was also a realist. She’d had her share of religious missionaries knock on her door once she began living on her own. One day, when she was waiting for a package to be delivered, she made the mistake of answering the door when she would have ignored them otherwise. The missionary, despite Ryoko’s polite rejections, blabbered on and on after assuring Ryoko that their conversation would be quick. Then, the missionary had said that, as long as Ryoko would believe the same things they did and pray, her problems would be solved and she would be saved, granting her a life of happiness.

That had rubbed Ryoko the wrong way. “So, your god’s so petty that he refuses to save anybody who doesn’t pray to him?” Admittedly, she had been frustrated by feeling pressured into a conversation she had no interest in while she was waiting for her much-anticipated package. As the missionary fell silent, Ryoko, who usually kept herself calm and collected, layered on the attacks. “Hardships are your god *testing* us...? Is he some kind of sadist? You say all your believers have to do is pray, but you want people to pay money when they join your religion or attend your services. Isn’t it all about money, then?”

The missionary retreated quickly after Ryoko had rambled all of that off without emotion, firing off a confused “You’ll never get married with that attitude” on their way out.

Ryoko later looked up the religion online to find that it was an extremely shady cult.

Because of experiences like that in his previous life, Herscherik hadn’t revered any god in this life, either. He knew, most of all, that praying to some far-off

entity wouldn't change reality. On the other hand, he understood that some people did rely on religion. Not everyone was strong enough to make it through life alone. Herscherik wouldn't blame anyone for finding a reason to live in a god or faith. Religion could be a source of support, as much as a parent to some.

But not them. They took advantage of those who believed. Investigations had revealed that everyone who had attacked Herscherik's party in the castle town had been members of the Church of Light. Also, Kuro had discovered that Hoenir was the leader of a faction of the Church that worshiped Saint Ferris, a notorious hotbed of extremists.

Saint Ferris was the hero of mysterious origins who had united the world in the New Dawn Era. That hero later earned the title of saint and joined the gods in the Garden Above, according to myth. His zealots shared the goal of recreating this worldwide unification to bring about equal peace to all, and they would employ any method necessary to achieve their goal.

Kuro had also discovered that weapons had been smuggled into the Church just recently. When you combined weapons with zealotry, there was only one possible result.

Herscherik opened his pocket watch. Exactly eight o'clock—an hour before the arrival time designated in the letter, and the time of the attack that Herscherik had coordinated with Marx. "It's time. Let's go."

Oran opened the door and walked through it, followed by Herscherik, then Kuro. They proceeded through the majestic Grand Cathedral to be greeted by a man in armor, carrying a sword.

"We thank you for your time, Your Highness Prince Herscherik, Seventh Prince of the Gracis Kingdom," said the armored man with a respectful bow. He looked to be in his mid-thirties with unremarkable features.

Herscherik didn't like the half-smirk on the man's face, which one could hardly call polite. *A knight of the Church... A Templar*, Herscherik guessed. Templars mainly guarded important figures in the Church or civilians and hunted monsters on occasion—mostly the same duties as a knight of the kingdom would have. The main difference between the two was that Templars

could come from any birth or background. Graduating from the knight's curriculum at the academy was a prerequisite for becoming a knight of the kingdom; even soldiers were required to have a certain degree of academic training. Templars, on the other hand, had no requirements for the job. Anyone who volunteered could become a Templar-in-training. To become an official Templar, however, one had to forsake worldly attachments and suffer through the long and arduous training regimen.

"I'm not interested in your thanks. Why isn't the one who requested my presence here to greet me?" Herscherik spat out.

"His Holiness is tending to another matter at the moment. My apologies, Your Highness." Despite his words and attitude, his tone was decidedly *not* apologetic.

With a hand on the hilt of his sword, Oran took a step forward. "Apologies? After threatening royalty?"

"Threaten? I would never. His Holiness has instructed us to provide His Highness with the warmest of welcomes."

At his answer, the several doors that led out of the Grand Cathedral were flung open as battle-ready Templars flooded in and surrounded the party.

"Fifty, give or take," Kuro muttered. Meanwhile, warriors with swords and lances blocked the main entrance, leaving them with nowhere to run.

"You already know how many Templars there are, don't you, Black Dog?"

"What do you think? I estimate about a hundred or so official Templars here. The rest must be fortifying the grounds."

From the conversation between Kuro and Oran, Herscherik figured that his brothers would not easily be able to break in, even if they made it there in time. He assumed that Hoenir had gathered every loyalist Templar he could find for this occasion. "I think he and I would disagree on what a 'warmest welcome' entails... Unless these Templars are going to cut a cake with their swords and serve it on their armor."

The Templar who had greeted them didn't bat an eye at Herscherik's sarcasm. "We simply follow His Holiness, wherever he may go," he declared, drawing his

sword. The blade reflected the light in the room, prompting the other Templars to draw their own swords, set their lances, and nock their arrows.

“It’s sad to see you all displaying your weapons before the eyes of the gods,” Herscherik said, dryly. “And here I had heard that Templars were proud servants of the people, showing compassion to all.” As he spoke, his mind was racing to find a way out of their predicament. *We don’t have too much time.* While he didn’t expect his men to lose, exactly, he imagined that it would take considerable time for them to neutralize all of the Templars. They had to make it to the chapel within the cathedral by nine o’clock if they wanted to save Shiro and Jeanne. They couldn’t afford to waste a second.

“Take Hersch and go, Black Dog.”

Before Herscherik could ask how they were going to escape from being surrounded, Kuro picked him up in his arms as if he was a piece of luggage. The gesture was so natural that it took Herscherik a moment to process.

“Huh?”

“Keep quiet, Hersch,” Kuro warned without an explanation. He didn’t wait for Herscherik to answer before springing to action. Kuro flung out his other arm and leaped into the air. With his master still clutched to his chest, he swung through the air towards the door, which was easily twice as high as a full-grown adult, at the end of the cathedral. They approached the door in a rapid charge, but Kuro landed on his feet with cat-like grace just before impact—still carrying Herscherik in his arms, of course.

Oran and Kuro alone understood what had happened. Kuro had flung a wire hidden in his sleeve to anchor it into a chandelier, then pulled on it to swing from the ceiling like a pendulum. While this seemed like an easy maneuver on paper, Kuro had to consider the angle of fulcrum, the durability of the chandelier, and his own weight combined with that of Herscherik. Not many others could have pulled it off as easily as he had.

I don’t know how that wire works, exactly... Oran thought. *But he is an ex-spy, after all. He’s sure light on his feet.* He couldn’t bring himself to say it out loud, though.

“The world’s... spinning...” Herscherik’s feeble mutter broke through the

silence. Ryoko had always had inner ear problems (which was why she hated roller coasters) and so did Herscherik.

Kuro called to Oran, left alone surrounded by the Templars. "Catch up, Sir Delinquent."

"I'll be right there as soon as I'm done," Herscherik's knight of service called back, drawing his sword with one hand and waving them off with the other.

Herscherik looked at him. "Oran!" Even though he knew how skilled his knight was, he couldn't help but worry as he saw him outnumbered fifty to one.

Oran dismissed that concern with a beaming smile. "Go ahead, Hersch. I'll be right there." Oran wasn't nervous, so Herscherik gave a confident nod in return.

Kuro flung the door open and sprinted out.

Oran watched them leave and then glanced around the room. None of the Templars moved. *Were they expecting this...?* Oran thought. *No, they planned for this exactly.* Oran recalled what Herscherik had told him before leaving the castle.

Once Kuro had returned Herscherik to his room, Cecily took Violetta to change out of her dirtied clothes with the rest of the triplets in tow.

"I'm still not sure what Hoenir is after," Herscherik had said. "But if he's after me, I've got a bad feeling about this." Herscherik then spat out, "He won't consider his demands met unless I go alone, but neither my father or brother would allow that. They might let me go if you two came along, though, even if they don't like it... And I have no choice *but* to go."

Hoenir well understood how Herscherik and his family would act, and had anticipated that the royal guards would arrive after a certain amount of time. He had robbed Herscherik of choice. His assumption was that he would try to separate them within the cathedral. "I don't want to walk into his trap..." Herscherik had muttered. "But we may not have an alternative."

Divide us? Let them try. I'll catch right up. Oran wore a dauntless grin, ready to break through any trap he found himself in. Both he and Kuro had gotten out

of a lot of tough spots over the past year. They had learned to trust each other in combat. Oran held his sword in a relaxed stance, as if he was just beginning his daily training.

“You expect to fight us all off alone?” One of the Templars frowned. As Hoenir had commanded, they had successfully separated one of the men of service from the prince. But even as he stood against an army of fifty Templars, the man seemed far too calm.

“Curious, huh? I am too...” Oran gave a laugh as if he was talking to an old friend. “I’m curious how you expected to take me on with nothing but numbers on your side!”

In an instant, Oran closed in on the man and kicked him square in his unguarded midsection. Taken by surprise after expecting the sword, the man was slammed against the altar. The Templars next to him swung their swords at Oran, who simply twisted to avoid the blades and struck at their outstretched arms in retaliation.

An arrow immediately came flying at Oran, but he knocked it out of the air easily. Oran defended against all of the Templars’ rapid-fire attacks and methodically took down each one. In a matter of minutes, Oran was looking down at a dozen injured Templars crawling on the ground—without even breaking a sweat.

During Operation Fortune Favors the Bold, Oran had fought bandits, street thugs, mercenaries, and even crooked knights or soldiers, arresting them all alive. When it came to combat experience, he was more seasoned than the Templars, whose main duties were training, bodyguarding, and hunting monsters. They were no match for Oran, who trained every day, had seen plenty of combat, and could easily take them down non-lethally.

This battle, however, was unlike any other Oran had faced before. Even though most of the Templars on the ground should have been unconscious or at least in too much agony to stand, they all rose to their feet. That should have been impossible... but then Oran saw a gleam of madness and euphoria in their eyes.

He recognized that gleam. *They’re using that drug...* Oran could feel his own

heart freeze over. That was the drug that had taken his fiancée from him. He couldn't help but loathe its very existence, and his grudge against it would last his entire life. While the drug provided the user with a feeling of euphoria and ecstasy, it was designed to bolster the user's physical strength and dull their sense of fear and pain, turning them into monsters.

"What could possibly be worth using *that*? What could be worth wasting your life for?" Oran's quiet wrath reverberated through the Grand Cathedral. It only took a single dose to make someone an addict until they died—which wouldn't be long, since the potent drug strengthened one's body far past its natural limits. Even if the drug had somehow been developed further, Oran didn't believe that the side effect would ever have been eradicated.

The Templar who first greeted them raised his sword. "To serve His Holiness in his supreme quest!"

"In the name of Saint Ferris!" the rest of the Templars chimed in. Their shouts soon became a booming chorus, shaking the Grand Cathedral.

"Zealots..." Oran spat out. Then, he gave a self-deprecating snicker. "Guess I don't have much room to talk."

"What was that?" the first Templar asked, his religious ecstasy interrupted.

Oran flicked his blade, and the blood on his blade marked the pristine floor of the Grand Cathedral with a crimson splatter. "Just like you have blind faith in Hoenir and your god, I trust my master." While the zealots and Oran both had something they were willing to risk their lives for, there was a definitive difference between them. "But that's where the similarities end. If my master goes down the wrong path, I've sworn to stop him, even if that means killing him." That was what Oran's master wanted most of him: to stop him from going down the wrong path, even if it meant his death.

In a way, Hersch is crazier than all of us. He kept a knight by his side with specific orders to kill him, after all. With a chuckle, Oran raised his sword. "Hoenir's wrong," Oran declared.

The Templars enraged. "His Holiness has never been, and will *never*, be wrong!"

“That’s what I mean. He’s already conditioned you not to question him,” Oran quietly countered. The men who served Hoenir had already been brainwashed to believe that their leader was flawless. Every human being struggled to make some decision and worried if they were right or wrong, save for the extremely fortunate, the mad, and those who had given up on forming their own thoughts. *Herscherik is always worried if what he’s doing is right, or if he would go down the wrong path.* While many might have stopped in their tracks over such worries, Herscherik was always able to keep moving forward, though with great effort. What’s more, he encouraged those who had stopped, giving them a helping hand and the courage to go on.

“Have you ever taken a life, Oran?” Herscherik had asked one day. Oran answered that he hadn’t. He had fought people before, but had never killed anyone. He had never needed to. Herscherik heard this answer, and continued with determination in his eyes, “I’m powerless. That’s why I need to rely on you two all the time.” When it came to combat, Herscherik was more of a hindrance than a help. However, Oran saw nothing wrong with that. Herscherik could leave any battles to him and the butler. They were more than capable of doing so.

Herscherik had countered that, saying, “Oran. Killing someone doesn’t end when the deed is done. Even if it’s the worst criminal in the world, you rob them of the rest of their life, and change the lives of those around them for better or worse... From that moment on, you carry their life and the vengeance of those close to them on your shoulders. That’s what I think.”

In fact, some of the newer knights or soldiers sometimes left the military after making their first kill, their minds consumed by it. Some others found sick pleasure in taking lives. Oran had wondered if Herscherik was concerned for his sanity, but immediately thought better. Herscherik was kind enough that he wouldn’t have chosen him for his knight if that had been a concern. Oran concluded that Herscherik was concerned for those whom Oran might kill.

“You don’t want me to kill anyone?” Oran had asked.

Herscherik had shook his head. “Not exactly. I can’t tell you that. How could I, when they’ll be trying to kill *you*?” Herscherik gazed into Oran’s eyes. “If you ever kill someone, you’ll have done it on my orders. It will be on my shoulders...

It's presumptuous, I know, but it's all I can do. So," he added, "don't hold back. Don't be afraid to take a life," Herscherik had declared.

If anyone else had told him that, Oran might have scoffed at such an empty speech. But knowing how Herscherik was always sincere, his words carried incredible weight with Oran.

"My master's too soft on his men," Oran muttered. Did the little prince expect any scion of Aldis to be raised with an idealistic philosophy like that? From the day he was first given a sword at a young age, Oran's father had always told him never to take up a weapon unless he was also prepared to take a life. As long as he wielded a blade, his father had always told him, there would come a day for him to make that choice.

I became a knight to achieve my dream... To make Hersch's dream come true. Oran stared down the Templars inching towards him. "I won't hold back, anymore. Now, it's life or death."

With those words, a massacre commenced in the Grand Cathedral. Oran turned to decapitate a Templar that leapt to attack him from behind. Another, completely unfazed by the death of his comrade, thrust his lance at Oran, but he dodged it with maximum efficiency before grabbing the weapon, slicing off the Templar's arm that held it, and stabbing him in the throat with his sword. He threw the lance with the arm still attached to it into the face of a Templar who had been aiming an arrow at him. Oran didn't bat an eye as Templar blood splattered him, unleashing his sword without mercy.

Eventually, the Templars stationed outside had rushed in after seeing that their comrades were losing the battle against a single man, but Oran slew every single one of them. When he took the life of the final Templar, his white uniform, handsome face, and even his sunset-colored hair was completely painted red... and not a drop of it his own.

This event would later be told in a chapter of the story of the Twilight Knight, titled "The Twilight Knight Vanquishes One Hundred Zealots."

Some time before the massacre, Kuro sprinted down the long hallway, his master in his arms. He had memorized the layout of the entire Church grounds

including the Grand Cathedral; as a result, he knew where the hallway would lead and had a guess as to how they could efficiently reach their destination. He gave a quick glance at his master, who kept quiet with a concerned frown.

“Are you worried about that meathead again, Hersch?”

“Hm...? Oran said he’s fine, so he’ll be fine. Are *you* worried, Kuro?” Herscherik muttered through his butler-sickness, which had led to an upset stomach and a frown on his face.

“No.”

“Of course...” Herscherik chuckled. Even as they bickered with each other, it was clear to see that they trusted each other—not that they would ever admit to it. “Of course I’m worried. But I believe in him. I know you do too, Kuro.”

Kuro scowled at the observation. He carried on with caution until he reached a door, where he lowered his master to his feet before the prince ended up doing his best impression of one of those merlion water-spouts.

Kuro opened the door as he scoped for any presence beyond it. Once satisfied that no one else was around, they went through it. The room beyond was octagonal, each corner holding a stone statue of a god. The dome-shaped ceiling depicted the Garden Above in beautiful stained glass. In contrast, the flooring was of dark stone that represented the gate into the Darkness Below. Herscherik had recognized these depictions because they reminded him of a picture book he had read early on in his studying.

There was a door that led further into the cathedral, opposite the door they had just come through.

“This is the hall right before the chapel... Which is most likely past that other door, but—Hersch!” Kuro grabbed Herscherik, who had been curiously observing the area, and leapt away. Heavy *clinks* rang through the room. Herscherik looked over Kuro’s shoulder to see two needles the size of his palm quivering in the ground. Another one had pierced Kuro’s right shoulder.

“Kuro!” Herscherik cried.

Kuro set his master down and yanked out the needle without much care. “I’m fine.” He stared across the room. “Come out, *now*.”

There was no response. After a short sigh, Kuro threw the needle into the seemingly unoccupied shadow of a statue. The shadow flickered like candlelight, and the needle was deflected. A tall and lanky man emerged from it, and Kuro stepped in front of the prince protectively.

“You live up to your reputation, Shadow Fang. The element of surprise wasn’t enough,” the man recited with a monotone, mechanical voice.

Herscherik carefully observed the figure from behind Kuro’s back. He was an expressionless man with dark clothes and a hood over his face, which reminded Herscherik of the men who attacked the orphanage. *He has to be the one I saw.*

Herscherik had seen him when he had felt a sense of being watched. A moment later, the three attackers and Baron Armin had fallen to the ground. When Herscherik looked back to where he was, the man had disappeared.

Herscherik felt an indescribable sense of dread and tugged at Kuro’s sleeve. Kuro kept his eyes on the man, placing his hand on Herscherik’s head.



“Go on, Hersch. We don’t have much time.”

“But...” Herscherik hesitated, looking at Kuro’s shoulder where the needle had struck him. He had been expected for them to be separated, but he was worried about how Kuro was moving his arm.

“Don’t you trust me?” Kuro asked.

While Herscherik couldn’t see Kuro’s face, his tone was filled with perfect confidence.

“Okay...!” Herscherik sprinted towards the door at the end of the room. He charged forward, flung it open, and disappeared into the other side.

Kuro and the attacker waited for Herscherik to leave in silence, without looking away from each other.

“You’re the one Hersch saw at the orphanage.” Kuro’s remark was left unanswered. “That’s fine. I wouldn’t admit it, either. I can only imagine how embarrassing it was to be spotted by a kid,” Kuro mocked.

“Keep talking,” the man calmly answered. “You only have until the poison kicks in.”

Kuro knew that the needle was poisoned from the paralyzing sensation in his right shoulder. His dominant hand was growing numb now, suggesting that the poison was quickly spreading through his body. “You may have a point...” In an instant, Kuro closed his distance between the man and stabbed the knife in his left hand towards the man’s face.

The attacker just barely dodged the knife, but couldn’t do the same for the kick that Kuro followed up the strike with; this he was forced to block with crossed arms. Then, Kuro switched the knife to his poisoned right hand, swinging it in an attempt to slice the man’s throat. The attacker took a step back at the last second to dodge the attack. After this flurry of blows, the man’s hood had been torn, blood trickling from a red line on his forehead.

The attacker wiped the blood with the back of his hand, staring at Kuro with eyes that had finally broken his mask-like non-expression. “How can you still move?” His eyes showed his disbelief that any human could stay standing while

afflicted by his poison of choice.

“If you want to poison me to death, you have to reach for the top shelf.” The knives in Kuro’s hands vanished like a magic trick. “This one hits pretty hard, but not hard enough,” Kuro said, as the attacker glared at him as though he was some kind of abomination.

Not only was Kuro well-versed enough in poisons enough to see through Jeanne’s assassination attempt, but his body had been engineered to withstand most poisons, too. It wasn’t something he chose for himself, but he was now grateful for it. His immunity was now helping him protect Herscherik.

“Why do you... or that knight, for that matter, serve the youngest prince, who has nothing?”

Perhaps the man’s curiosity was natural. The seventh and youngest prince had no patrons, no power, nor any talent to speak of. He was too young to even attend the academy. Any outsider would have struggled to understand how a powerful spy like Kuro, or a member of the famous Aldis family, the country’s best lineage of knights, would choose to serve him.

“Nothing?” A dangerous light flickered in Kuro’s deep, ruby eyes. “I have never met anyone who has as much as Herscherik does.” Strength and knowledge were only worth so much. Power meant less than money to someone like Kuro, who had spent much of his life in the underground.

“What do you want from *your* master?” Kuro asked his attacker. “Strength? Intelligence? Fame? Power, or money? Not good looks, I hope.” Kuro had no interest in such superficial qualities. He had seen all sorts of people through his life, from the highest of the elite to those on the bottom of the ladder. He had seen the darkness and the light of this world, all of its beautiful qualities as well as the ugly ones. He had seen too much, lost hope, and had given up.

But Herscherik was different from anyone he had ever encountered. A dedicated worker. Kind and stubborn. Straightforward but wise. Weak but strong. His master shone brightly with all of his paradoxical qualities. “Anyone who underestimates Herscherik is only revealing how insignificant they are. In a way, your archbishop has a good eye for talent,” Kuro smirked. Herscherik was on to Hoenir’s plan, although he suspected that something else was afoot. “If

he's shallow enough for Hersch to see straight through his plans, he won't stand a chance."

"That's why you let him go..."

Kuro smirked. "You didn't expect to get to our prince this easily, did you?" Kuro stood, relaxed. Even though the effects of the poison were mitigated, numbness was still creeping into his limbs.

The attacker raised his hand and the shadows of the gods' statues flickered, revealing more men dressed like the first, now surrounding them. They formed a circle outside of Kuro's range.

"I'm short on time. Let's make this quick." Kuro moved his hands slightly. A *whish* followed—and two heads flew into the air. The other attackers widened their eyes in shock, mirroring the expression on the severed heads of their comrades. The headless bodies slumped to the ground, the stump of their necks erupting in a fountain of blood.

"What... did you do?" the first man asked. His target hadn't moved a single step, but two of his men had been decapitated as if by the invisible scythe of Death himself.

"What's the point of answering? You're just going to the 'Darkness Below,' as the Church puts it?" Kuro swung his arms again.

"Back off!" the man reflexively shouted, and then followed his own advice. His men did the same, but one of them staggered, leaving blood to spew from his neck before he fell without a word. While his head wasn't completely detached, his neck was halfway severed.

"That poison *is* starting to take effect..." Kuro shrugged, and shook his hands again. Red lines danced through the air before contracting into his sleeves. Soon, the attackers realized that these were blood-soaked wires.

"What is that thing...?!" The man groaned at the completely foreign weapon, his face frozen from fear rather than to hide his emotions. He couldn't understand how a barely visible wire could sever body parts, nor how it was being manipulated without a weight on the other end.

"Why should I answer you?" In a flash, Kuro held a knife in each hand. He had

decreased their numbers with a surprise attack, but his poisoned body wasn't exactly in top form. Not that he had any intention of losing. *But this might take longer than I thought*, Kuro silently complained—and leapt towards the enemy to take them down.

Herscherik caught his breath as he stood before the door. After running here, his breathing was heavy and his knees were shaking. *No*, Herscherik acknowledged the faint fear within him. His knees weren't just shaking from the run. He was alone now, left without the two men who had always protected him. Things had gone mostly as he'd expected.

His men didn't look happy when Herscherik had predicted this outcome. "We don't *have* to walk into their trap," they had countered. Even still, Herscherik stuck to his decision. If he didn't walk into this trap, Jeanne and Shiro would die. Just as fortune favored the bold, there was no reward without risk. *I thought I'd been through a lot, but here I am*. Herscherik had been in many dangerous situations during his operations. He had nearly been kidnapped, assaulted, or even killed. At every turn, his men of service had protected him.

Now, they weren't here. Herscherik slapped his thighs to brace himself. The full-force slap had left his legs and palms stinging for a moment, but at least the shaking had stopped. *Woman up...! Or... I guess it's man up, now!* Herscherik opened the door to an explosion of light.

"Watch out!" a voice called, as she felt her arm being yanked back.

She staggered at the sudden movement, but someone had caught her from behind, keeping her from falling. A car drove away as it furiously honked its horn. A fold-up umbrella lay in the middle of the crosswalk.

"What?" Her brain froze. This was the first time she had ever been embraced by a man outside of her family. Who could have blamed her for over-reacting a little?

The man's voice continued from above, "Who goes that fast when you can barely see the road? You should have checked the light, too... Wait, are you... Hayakawa?"

It took her a few moments before Ryoko realized that the man was talking to her. “Um...” She looked up to see a tall man in a business suit, his slicked-back hair ruffled a bit. He wore a well-tailored suit and coat, but his broad shoulders and back had gotten wet from the rain, presumably after pulling Ryoko into his arms. The man was calm and good looking, like someone who would be featured in a magazine as the quintessential Man Who Gets the Job Done.

“Don’t you remember me? Come on, we went to high school together.” The man grinned.

Something about his grin jogged Ryoko’s memory. She recognized a few things about him. “Are you...? Takanashi?”

“Bingo!” Takanashi cheerfully smiled. “It’s been a while, Hayakawa.”

Ryoko could feel her heart skip a beat at that smile. She caught, in the corner of her eye, the torrential downpour turning into an ordinary drizzle.

Chapter Nine: An Old Friend, the Best Ending, and the Reunion

Ryoko was so startled by her sudden reunion with one of her very few male friends from her school days, she forgot that she was still being held in his arms.

The friend in question was Yuto Takanashi, a high school classmate of hers who now looked like the quintessential career man. Back in high school, he'd been the extroverted popular kid of class. With a friendly demeanor and attractive appearance to match, he had numerous admirers in all grade levels. Despite this, he had always remained faithful to any girl he was dating, which had made a good impression on Ryoko.

"I haven't seen you in ages! How long has it been?" He released Ryoko from his arms, although they maintained an intimate distance as they shared an umbrella in the rain.

Ryoko recognized his smile, and smiled herself in return. He was the popular type who lived the full high school experience, but he'd never treated Ryoko or other geeks any differently. In fact, cliques in their class had intermingled with each other much more than was typical. Takanashi had built bridges between the nerds and the party animals, the athletic and the artsy, and the extroverts and the introverts, so everyone in their class could have fun. At the time, Ryoko had viewed him as a shojo manga hero come to life.

"It *has* been a long time, hasn't it?" Ryoko confirmed. "I've been doing pretty good. How about you, Takanashi?"

"Not too bad, not too bad... Except for almost working myself to death. Couldn't make it to any of the reunions..."

"Me neither," Ryoko chimed in. Their class had always held reunions every few years, but Ryoko had not made it to the past two or three because of her work schedule.

"Oh, Hayakawa. Hold this for a sec." He handed her the umbrella and Ryoko

reflexively took it. After making sure there were no oncoming cars, he went down the crosswalk and retrieved Ryoko's fold-up umbrella. "Here you go."

As Ryoko took her own umbrella, Takanashi retrieved his from her hands—all while making sure that she stayed dry, of course. The maneuver was so natural that Ryoko couldn't help but silently mutter *smooth as butter...* in a deep southern accent, no less.

"Sorry, thank you," she muttered out loud. "I would have gotten it myself..."

"Don't worry about it. Does it still work?"

Ryoko checked the umbrella to see that the frame had bent out of shape, making it unretractable. She couldn't help but let out a long sigh. "This was pretty expensive." The umbrella was from a high-end brand, which she had impulse bought many years ago and used ever since. Even worse, the brand had discontinued the design.

Takanashi patted her shoulder in consolation. "Better than dying, though, right? You seriously got to be careful, though. Would have scarred me for life if I saw you go *splat*."

"Says someone who was a little too into horror games back in high school."

Video games were something Ryoko and Takanashi had in common. While Ryoko was already deep into otome games at the time, she also dabbled in all kinds of genres—fighting games, dungeon crawlers, RPGs, and pet-raising sims. Even though her monthly allowance and part time salary all turned into video games, she had managed to live a very fulfilled school life.

Takanashi wasn't as deep into the *otaku* realm as Ryoko was, but they had spent many hours in heated conversation on video games. He had been particularly fond of action games, and had poured an exorbitant number of hours into one particular zombie shooter. That being said, Ryoko had always been averse to anything horror-themed, so she'd always turned down any invites from Takanashi to play games in that genre with him.

"Video games aren't *real*, Hayakawa. That's the point, don't you think?"

"Yes, yes. I get it. I'm sorry. I'll be more careful. Thank you for saving me. Really." *I really did cut it close*, Ryoko thought, and swore never to make the

same mistake again. She really didn't want to die, after all.

"Rain's let up."

Takanashi's comment prompted Ryoko to look up at the sky. There was no sign of the downpour, and stars even peeked through breaks in the clouds. The storm had come and gone. Takanashi closed his umbrella, and Ryoko forced her own shut. A nasty *snap* was heard along the way, as if the little umbrella had let out its dying breath. This prompted Ryoko to let out another sigh.

Takanashi said, "Looked like you were in a hurry. Did you have any plans? Are you meeting someone, maybe?"

"No, I was just going to the game shop down the..." Ryoko began to answer, preoccupied with mourning her umbrella—then realized that she, a woman in her mid-thirties, had just confessed to having *plans* to go buy a video game. She covered her mouth much too late.

"Still a gamer, huh?" Takanashi chuckled.

Ryoko scowled to mask her embarrassment. "Does that bother you?"

He shook his head. "Nope. Glad to see you haven't changed."

Ryoko didn't know what to make of the response, and looked away as she maintained her scowl.

Somehow, Ryoko had ended up at the game store with Takanashi in tow.

"Here's your copy... and your change."

"Thank you," Ryoko said, taking the bag and coins from the cashier she had long ago become friends with.

"Ryoko... I'm concerned that you've brought a guy to pick up *this kind* of game." The cashier glanced at Takanashi, who was curiously browsing the shelf stocked with used games from a generation prior.

Ryoko let out a chuckle at her implicating glance. "Well, he's just a high school friend I ran into."

A smirk spread across the cashier's face. "Oh? Sounds like you're on track for a *Best Ending* to me." And there was the video game lingo. She and Ryoko

shared a vice, after all.

“Nope. Not happening,” Ryoko denied, shaking her hand and head. Her eyes began to wander, which only made the snicker on the cashier’s face more mischievous.

Just when Ryoko was about to deny her suggestions again, Takanashi interrupted, “Hayakawa, check out this blast from the past.” He held up a particular action game with a progression system based around hunting monsters, collecting materials, and improving the character’s weapons instead of leveling up the character itself, putting more focus on equipment and player skill. It was a massive hit when Ryoko and Takanashi were in high school. Ryoko remembered playing it too.

“One just came out for the current gen.”

The video game series had kept its popularity right up to the recently released title. Ryoko hadn’t purchased it herself, but it was definitely the season’s most difficult game to acquire, selling out in store after store.

“Where? Show me.”

“Wonder if they’ve actually got a copy here... I heard they were selling out everywhere.”

They headed to the New Releases shelf.

By the time they left the game shop, Ryoko’s wallet had gotten lighter than expected, and Takanashi had left with a video game, console, and even a strategy guide.

“I can’t wait to play this,” he said. “Things finally settled down at work. My team knows what they’re doing now, which means less overtime for me... But a little *too much* free time for a single guy to sit alone in his apartment.”

Ryoko tilted her head. “Wait, you don’t have a wife? Or kids?” She recalled how Takanashi had gone off to the same college as his high school sweetheart. She was convinced that they would end up getting married.

A shadow fell over Takanashi’s expression. “I’m still single, yeah. If you’re talking about my high school girlfriend, I broke up with her like ten years ago.”

He went on to tell that they had been going steady until they graduated college. She wanted to get married right away, but Takanashi had asked her to wait until he'd started his career and built a foundation for their lives. She apparently didn't like that answer, but failed to make this clear to Takanashi, who put himself to work for long hours, day in and day out. The company he worked for at the time was going through some changes, which meant that he worked overtime every day and barely received any days off. However the job itself was his dream job, so he never grew tired of it.

As he lost himself in his work, he had ended up neglecting his girlfriend. One night, when they were in their late twenties, she had cheated on him with a coworker of hers, and their relationship had ended.

Now that is some soap-level drama! Ryoko silently interjected. Sure, some blame lay with Takanashi for neglecting his girlfriend. She'd been desperate to get married, but was forced to wait; then on top of that, her boyfriend ignored her. It was easy to understand how she might have fallen for a man whispering some kind words.

Takanashi was an objectively handsome man, so Ryoko expected that the girlfriend might have also been a little insecure because of that—not to mention that women have a biological clock. Building romantic relationships was one thing, but having children only became more dangerous with age. Ryoko, as someone who was about to turn thirty-five in a day, could somewhat understand the loneliness, nervousness, and insecurities that Takanashi's ex must have felt.

On the other hand, she could sympathize with Takanashi, too. Wanting a solid foundation for their lives was another way of saying that he never wanted his girlfriend to go without. That was a genuine sentiment, and was practically a proposal in and of itself.

Besides, the girlfriend had issued the forbidden ultimatum, "It's me or your job!"

That ultimatum was a cliché in dramas, but Ryoko imagined that only fictional characters could really choose between the two. Takanashi had worked hard because he cared about his girlfriend and wanted her to have a good life. But

would she have been truly happy with Takanashi neglecting his career, setting them up for financial difficulties later? Ryoko imagined that she wouldn't have been.

They didn't talk to each other enough, she thought, as most with more life experience than the young couple might have realized. Takanashi and his girlfriend had both been young and had gotten caught up in their own lives, neglecting to communicate with each other. Neither of them could have been blamed entirely, but Ryoko always secretly admired the pair, so she couldn't help but feel disappointed that his girlfriend had crossed that line of infidelity.

"That must have been tough," Ryoko said. She doubted that he wanted to hear any lecture or criticism from a high school classmate he hadn't seen in over a decade, nor did she feel like giving him some platitude that his girlfriend was entirely to blame.

"What about you, Hayakawa? Oh, guess you shouldn't be hanging out with me alone if you've got a husband waiting for you."

"As if I could ever find one," she proudly declared, which prompted a chortle from Takanashi. She was secretly glad that the shadow on his expression was gone.

"Is that really something to be proud of...? If that's true, you should come play this with me some time. Oh, and do you want to go get something to eat?"

"What? Are you asking me out?" Ryoko teased, thinking that he was just being polite. She ended up looking up at Takanashi, who was a bit taller than her.

Her expectation, however, was betrayed by a coy grin. "Is that a yes?"

Ryoko felt her heart skip at Takanashi's smile, which had taken on a romantic feel all of a sudden. She looked away, not knowing what else to do in a real-life flirtatious conversation. "I'll think about it..." she muttered.

"In that case," Takanashi quickly took a business card and pen out of his coat pocket and jotted down something on the back of the card. "Here's my number. I could use your help with this game, too..." He handed the card to Ryoko. "I hope you give me a call." With that, he walked away.

After watching him leave, Ryoko looked down at the business card and was surprised to find that it listed the name of a very big company—one of the major clients for her own job. He was the head of a department. They were the same age, but Ryoko could see how hard he'd worked from the difference in their career. While Ryoko also worked in the headquarters of a major company, she had fewer responsibilities and less pressure since she wasn't heading a department.

She turned the business card around to find his number. Ryoko stood where she was for a few minutes, just staring at the card—a token of the very first time a man had asked her out.

After returning to her condo, wiping off her make-up and changing into loungewear, Ryoko placed her dinner on the table and sat down on her beloved sofa.

"I am *exhausted*..." she muttered as she turned on the TV and cracked open a can of beer, pouring the contents into a glass. The golden ale frothed to a perfect foam, which she downed with manly vigor before letting out a satisfied grunt and wiping her lips. "That's the stuff. Nothing beats a cold one after a day's work!" Ryoko nodded in contentment as she flipped through the channels.

Putting down the half-finished drink, she reached for her chopsticks to start on her dinner, which was more of a side to her glass of beer. This night's course consisted of microwaved cabbage topped with mayonnaise, soy sauce, and bonito flakes, as well as a slightly-nicer pork chop she'd gotten from her parents' house and a chicken skewer she'd picked up at a convenience store on her way home. As Ryoko lived alone, no one was there to complain that her dinner table lacked any sense of femininity or homeliness.

I thought I had run out of cabbage, but lucky me. She felt like an entirely carnivorous diet wouldn't have been too good for her health, but she hadn't had the chance to buy groceries amidst her busy schedule. She had expected to come home to an empty vegetable drawer in her fridge, but had instead been greeted by a half head of cabbage. Julienned cabbage heated in the microwave had become a staple in Ryoko's apartment.

After picking through her dinner and finishing her beer, Ryoko let out a sigh. Watching TV and eating dinner alone was a normal routine for her, but tonight she seemed to have a difficult time finding her appetite. She knew exactly why, too.

As she drank beer, ate, and watched TV, she couldn't help thinking about Takanashi. Whenever she came home with a new game, she usually cut her dinner short to boot it up, but she didn't even feel like doing that tonight. She glanced over at her dresser, her purse and business card sitting on top of it. *Takanashi's even more good-looking now. I bet girls are all over him.* He had grown into a man who looked fantastic in a business suit.

He's not really interested in me, right...? Ryoko was a master of love when it came to video games, but just an *otaku* spinster in real life. Now, a good-looking classmate had come into her after more than fifteen years. What's more, this single and available man had literally saved her life. Just like her cashier friend had said, if this was a video game, he would obviously be a *conquerable* character.

"Nope. Not happening. Not a chance." Ryoko shook her head as if to banish the thought. Real life wasn't as convenient as a video game, nor a dream. She wasn't a starry-eyed teenager anymore, either.

Just then, she heard a song coming from the TV. She turned to the screen to find a female artist singing a ballad. "She's gotten pretty popular now," Ryoko mused. Usually she had only been interested in anime songs and video game soundtracks, but she'd come across this particular singer and had bought every album she'd put out.

When Ryoko had first heard this artist, she had only just gotten her first record deal and wasn't very well known. Now, she was singing on TV. *I haven't really listened to her songs lately.* Once the performance ended, Ryoko turned off the TV and stood up from her seat. Then, she turned on the stereo and set the volume low. While the walls of her condo were relatively soundproof, it was late enough in the day that she wanted to respect her neighbors.

A nostalgic song began to play. *It's been a while, but this one never gets old,* Ryoko thought. The song had a slower tempo suited to its heartfelt lyrics, and

this particular song had always helped Ryoko calm down whenever she was upset. She quietly sang along, and just as her favorite part—the chorus—was about to start, she felt a stinging pain in her head.

Ryoko clasped her forehead and the image of a little girl flashed into her mind. Her long copper hair flowed in the wind. *What?* She didn't recognize the girl, but Ryoko felt a sense of breathlessness, like someone had grabbed hold of her lungs. *What's going on? Who is that girl...?*

Before she could come up with an explanation, a wave of pain swept through her head, erasing the vision of the girl from Ryoko's mind. *I did get rained on today... Maybe I caught a cold. Guess I'll call it a night.* With a sigh, Ryoko turned off the stereo.

She then spotted a pocket watch right beside it. An antique-looking silver pocket watch.

"When did I get this?" Ryoko wondered aloud. She reached for the watch when her headache suddenly became pounding, prompting her to squeeze out a groan. "I better lie down," she muttered as she turned away from the watch without touching it. Moving the dishware she had left on the table into the sink, Ryoko took some medicine from the medicine cabinet and brushed her teeth before crawling into bed. Then, she closed her eyes, already dreading waking up early in the morning to take a shower and wash the dishes.

She soon let go of her consciousness, forgetting all about the girl and the silver pocket watch.

That weekend, Ryoko visited her parents' home. Her family was hosting a thirty-fifth birthday party for her. With a fancy pint of ice cream in one hand, she had walked over to her parents' home from her condo. When she entered the front gate, the all-black guard dog had greeted her with a wagging tail.

"Who's a good boy, Kuro?" Ryoko asked.

The large black dog, whose snout came up to Ryoko's waist even when he was seated, answered with a *ruff!*

Just then, a black-haired young man appeared in Ryoko's mind. *Wait...* She

felt like she might have recognized him. The throb of a headache prevented her from recalling exactly where she knew him from, though.

Guess I'm not over that cold. Ryoko pinched the bridge of her nose. She had been having terrible headaches lately, and any medicine she took barely did anything to help. Even at work, the headache had given her a perpetual scowl, prompting her boss to ask if she was upset about something.

As she massaged between her brows to try and mitigate the pain to some degree, Kuro rubbed against her leg, concerned. She pet his head, and the dog wagged his tail so hard that it seemed in danger of flying right off.

"Let's go for a walk later."

Kuro answered Ryoko's promise with a gleeful bark.

Ryoko stepped into the house and called to her parents as she went to put the ice cream away in the freezer. As she struggled to make room for the pint, her mother snuck up from behind her and said, "Seems like something's up with you... Did you finally get yourself a man?"

"Huh?!" Ryoko blurted in surprise, and dropped the ice cream. It happened to fall into the space she had arranged for it, albeit with a loud noise. She turned around to find a grin on her mother's face, and her father glanced back at them from the couch where he had been reading the paper. "That came out of nowhere," Ryoko remarked.

"Something's different about you... Like you've got this *aura*, you know? Don't underestimate a mother's intuition," she added, prompting Ryoko to stammer back a response. Her mother always did have a keen sense of intuition, especially when it came to family. Ryoko couldn't think of a secret she had ever successfully kept from her mother. "How long has this been going on?" she piled on. "How old is he? Where does he work? Are you going to marry him?"

"Why do you always have to jump straight to that?!"

"I *knew* you'd got yourself a man," her mother smirked again.

Ryoko finally realized that she had walked into her trap. Even after thirty-five years, she never felt like she stood a chance against her mother. "It's none of

your business if I did,” she said to try and regain some dignity, although it came out sounding like a petulant teenager. She looked away.

Her mother’s expression shifted to one of concern. “We’re both worried about you,” she said. “We wait year after year and you never even find a boyfriend, let alone a husband. I know that looking for a boyfriend just to get married seems backwards, but what are you going to do once we’re gone?”

“I’m fine by myself. And I have two wonderful sisters and a beautiful niece...” Ryoko couldn’t be too combative in the face of her mother’s genuine concern, though.

Her mother kept going. “It can be really tough when you find yourself all alone. It’ll help a lot if you have someone you can really lean on.”

Ryoko pondered. *Alone*. She imagined herself living alone, with no one to rely on. Growing older, year after year, alone. The image of a silver-haired man sitting on a sofa in front of a fireplace came to mind, but it too was wiped out by her surging headache.

“Ooh... you’re thinking of a man, aren’t you?!” her mother pointed out.

Ryoko shook her head. She didn’t want to think of anything with this headache she was having. “I was not...! There’s still time until everyone gets here, so I’ll take Kuro out for a bit.” She walked past her mother—who wasn’t satisfied with the answer—dodged her father’s implicating look, and headed to the front door.

Opening the door, Ryoko found Kuro standing at the ready like a loyal soldier. She chuckled at the sight and removed the leash from Kuro’s around-the-block tote and clicked it onto Kuro’s collar before walking out the gate.

Kuro was an outside dog who spent most of his time in the yard, but he never went past the gate, even if it was open, unless he was being taken on a walk. He was such a smart guard dog that even when a stranger came into the yard, he would bark but never bite. On top of that, he never tugged on the leash when being walked and matched his stride with his owners. He only walked a few steps ahead of Ryoko, occasionally turning around as if to make sure she was still there.

“Why won’t mom shut up about marriage, Kuro?” Ryoko asked. Kuro responded with a sympathetic *ruff*, although Ryoko didn’t believe he really understood her. “Thanks for always letting me vent.”

Just as Kuro responded with another *ruff*, Ryoko spotted a little girl of about six or seven years old walking their way. Ryoko guided Kuro to the edge of the sidewalk and commanded, “Kuro, sit... Lie down.” He obeyed immediately. While Ryoko didn’t expect Kuro to ever attack or even bark at a child, he was big enough to intimidate a grown man. She didn’t want to risk the girl being scared and jumping out into the road.

When the little girl passed them with a small glance at Kuro, Ryoko could have sworn the girl had curly sienna hair. She turned around to see the back of the girl’s head—but she had a very ordinary black braid hanging down her back. *What did I see...?* Ryoko tilted her head, and Kuro *ruffed* at her. With an apology, Ryoko resumed Kuro’s walk.

Ryoko followed the usual dog-walk route and came to the park near the end. Twilight had lit up the entire sky above in a golden orange. “Beautiful...” Ryoko muttered. The sun was setting earlier and earlier as they approached winter, so Ryoko was usually greeted by a few stars in the night sky by the time she got out of work. She hadn’t seen a sunset like this in a long time.

The nostalgic orange somehow got her choked up, as if her heart was breaking. *Why...?* The sky’s color showed a vision of a faint landscape she didn’t know and someone she didn’t recognize. Ryoko tried to picture what she was seeing more clearly when the headache struck again, as if to bully her out of thinking too deeply. *What is this...?* This had happened every time she tried to remember something.

Ryoko wondered, through the worsening headache, if she was forgetting something important. She couldn’t shake the feeling, but she also couldn’t figure out what she had forgotten. The more she tried to remember, the worse her headache became. Even still, Ryoko didn’t give up. Something inside would not let her do so.

Then, she heard a *meow*. Ryoko turned to the park bench to find a cat sitting on it, bathed in the golden orange of the sunset. She knew that the cat actually

had pure white fur, and never befriended or even came up to anyone. It was rare to see the cat cry at all. “Long time no see, Shiro,” Ryoko called, which the cat met with an annoyed flick of its tail.

Shiro stared at Ryoko with its golden eyes before getting up and out of the bench, as if to say that the cat was too busy to spend much time with her. “You give me one meow, then back to normal. What a tease you are,” she chuckled. *First she’s hot, then she’s cold... Guess that’s better than Mister Ice-Cold-24-7.*

Ryoko froze. *Who am I thinking about?* She couldn’t answer that thought as a dull pain overtook her head. Until Kuro rubbed against her leg, she stood there motionless.

Ryoko returned to her condo after her thirty-fifth birthday party and began organizing the presents she’d received from her sisters. One of the presents was a limited edition DVD box set of an anime, which she had been wanting for ages. She had forgotten to pre-order and hadn’t been able to find it through online auctions, but her sisters had coincidentally come across a copy. She went to pop in the first disc when Takanashi’s business card, still left on the dresser, caught her eye. She hadn’t sent him a text yet.

“It can be really tough when you find yourself alone,” her mother’s words echoed in her mind. After some thought, Ryoko picked up her cellphone and opened her contact list.

After half an hour of typing and re-reading and re-re-reading the text—which included another thanks for his help, an apology for taking so long to contact him, and a question about his new video game—she hit send.

Ryoko’s phone went off five minutes later, indicating a new text. She read it eagerly, her heartbeat growing faster. Takanashi had thanked her for sending him a text, answered that yes, he was enjoying his new game, and... *“Do you want to go out for dinner, this Friday?” Is he... asking me on a date?!* She had never received a text asking her out, either. Her heart beat faster.

It took Ryoko another half an hour to reply.

The next Friday, Ryoko was uncharacteristically frazzled. She kept staring at

the clock on her computer screen. The day usually went by fairly quickly when she was at work, but not today.

One of her younger coworkers commented, half an hour before the end of the work day, “You changed up your make-up today, Miss Hayakawa.”

“Y-You noticed?” Ryoko reflexively covered her cheeks. She had, indeed, used different blush, eyeshadow, and lipstick. That being said, her make-up was still office-appropriate and only different enough from her usual routine that one would have had to pay close attention to notice. *Little Yamada’s a social butterfly, after all...* Her coworker was a cutesy type, a trendy young woman with a great sense of style. She was quite popular among the male workers of the office, but she had a boyfriend already. Yamada had a ditsy side, too, which Ryoko found to be her most charming quality.

“Sure did! You went with a cute palette, today... Oh, I know! You have a date tonight!”

“N-No, I...! Can’t you at least ask, Yamada?!” Ryoko panicked at the gleam in her coworker’s eyes. A few other coworkers looked up at her reaction, but Ryoko was too preoccupied to notice.

“And you’re wearing colorful clothes today! You never do that!”

In fact, Ryoko had worn an outfit devoid of her familiar neutral tones after spending an hour researching the topic online. She wasn’t going to say that out loud, though. Ryoko violently shook her head in denial. “I’m telling you, Yamada. I don’t! And keep your voice down!” she added in a hush.

Yamada ignored her and grabbed the pile of paperwork Ryoko had set aside. “Leave the rest to me, Miss Hayakawa. You should get ready to go!”

“I know Fridays are date nights for you and your boyfriend, Yamada. And that task—”

“My boyfriend’s going out with his coworkers today, so no worries! Do you have anything else?”

Ryoko was interrupted before she could say “...isn’t due for another week.” At the end of the day, after Yamada carried on like *she* was the one going on a date, Ryoko thanked her and left her seat as soon as she could clock out.

Once Ryoko left the office, the remaining workers gathered around Yamada's desk, clamoring her with all sorts of questions.

"Ryo's got a boyfriend?!"

"She can't get married! We can't afford to lose her!"

"There are a bunch of people at her old branch that have got their eyes on her!"

"Someone asked me to set him up with her..."

Eventually the department head joined in for an emergency meeting, but Ryoko was none the wiser.

Ryoko changed into her outfit in the dressing room and looked at her reflection in the full-length mirror on the wall. She was wearing a ruffled white blouse and a knee-length skirt with a large floral pattern. Ryoko thought it was tastefully put together—not too flashy, but not frumpy and grandma-like, either. *Sure, it's a little brighter than my usual...* In retrospect, she wondered if she was letting on more than she realized, seeing how Yamada saw right through her. This would be the first actual dinner date of her life.

Then, she caught sight of a scale that someone had brought in among a few other personal belongings that various employees kept out of the way in the dressing room. *I haven't checked in a while...* In other words, she didn't want to face the reality of her declining physique. That being said, Ryoko wanted to improve herself if she was going to enter a relationship in the future.

She carefully stepped onto the scale. When her weight appeared on the display, something snapped inside her.

"Yep, uh huh. Right. Of course..." She stood there staring at the dreadful number with her head on the wall.

Ryoko and Takanashi were at a fancy bar inside a luxurious hotel. The windows were floor-to-ceiling, allowing a clear view of the skyline beyond the softly lit interior. Sofas and tables were placed to allow patrons to look out at the city, which made this a popular spot for couples.

After they had eaten at a restaurant Takanashi suggested, there was a little quarrel between them when Ryoko suggested splitting the bill but Takanashi insisted on paying. While she had let Takanashi pay for the sake of his pride when the bill arrived, Ryoko had never been keen on being treated. Once they left the restaurant, she tried to hand him cash, but he stubbornly refused. After going back and forth, Takanashi finally relented when Ryoko threatened, “If we don’t split the bill, I’m never going anywhere with you again.”

Then, Takanashi had offered to buy her a drink for her birthday, and she had agreed to that. When he brought her to an obviously expensive bar instead of a local *izakaya*, Ryoko knew that she had been outsmarted. She couldn’t refuse to go into the bar when she had already insisted on splitting the dinner bill, even though she kept wondering how many beers she could get at her local bar for the price of one cocktail here.

“Then, one of my coworkers said...” Takanashi excitedly told her stories about his work, which Ryoko nodded along to as she sipped her drink. “Sorry, am I boring you?” Takanashi asked, noticing the lack of reaction from Ryoko. “I’ve only been talking about my work for a while...”

“It’s not boring at all. There’s lots of things to learn from it, and I can tell how much you enjoy your job.” Ryoko liked her job, too. She was fond of her office and the people who worked there. In a way, she felt a sense of camaraderie with Takanashi. She lived for her hobbies, while Takanashi lived for his work, and both of them were approaching forty, still single and unattached.

“Work did get me cheated on. After that, it was all I had...” Takanashi gave a self-deprecating chuckle.

“I bet you’re popular with the ladies, though. Isn’t there someone you have your eye on?” *He’s gotta be popular*, she thought. Good-looking, good at his job, funny, and kind—and he seemed to have really aged well. Any men around Ryoko who were remotely a catch were already taken, so any single men usually had some issues.

Takanashi chuckled again. “I’m not, and there isn’t. Everyone thinks I’m all work and no play.”

“Crazy. I wouldn’t let you get away,” Ryoko teased.

Takanashi's expression became serious. "You mean that, Hayakawa?" His reaction had taken Ryoko out of her buzz. "I was actually relieved when I met you at that crosswalk."

"Relieved?"

"That you haven't changed since high school, I mean."

"Well. I've gotten *older*."

"You don't have to say that about yourself, you know... And that's not what I mean," he said with a chuckle. "How you are, I guess. You always had this unique *aura* about you. It's hard to explain."

Ryoko gave him the stink eye. "Are you trying to say I'm weird? Or that I'm as immature as I was in high school?"

"No, I'm telling you...! You're doing this on purpose, aren't you?" Takanashi set his glass down on the table and looked Ryoko square in the eyes. "Hayakawa. If it's all right with you... I'd like to see you again. A lot more often." He inched closer to her. Despite the sofa being large enough for two, Takanashi began crossing over into her half. "And... won't you call me Yuto? I would like to call you Ryoko, if I may." His face grew even closer to Ryoko's.

The next instant, Ryoko stopped him with a chop to his forehead. "I'd really be jumping for joy right now... if any of this was *real*," Ryoko grinned, keeping her hand on his forehead. Then she stood, pushing Takanashi back by his shoulders.

"What...?" He seemed frozen in shock from the sudden rejection.

Leaving him behind, Ryoko approached the floor-to-ceiling windows. A gorgeous skyline rolled out beyond it. "I said, *if* this was real, Takanashi." She turned to him, leaning on the window.

Takanashi was still immobilized. "Ryoko, I don't understand what you're..."

Ryoko chuckled, produced the silver pocket watch, and stared at it. "This is quite a well-made illusion. I almost fell for it," she muttered, tightening her grip on the watch. As if to give her courage again like it had once, the pocket watch had never left her side.

“Ryoko Hayakawa died at thirty-four. I am Herscherik Gracis, the Seventh Prince of the Gracis Kingdom.”

Just as she declared this, time stood still—and the world of illusions cracked and shattered to pieces, including the now completely emotionless Takanashi... or something else that had taken his form.

Ryoko had felt a sense of displacement here and there, but overall, this world was far too convenient for Ryoko. She met a man who was just her type, whom she knew for years but was also single and available. The rain had stopped when her umbrella broke. She got her hands on a copy of a sold-out video game with almost no effort, there was cabbage in the fridge when it should have been empty, her birthday present was a special item she’d completely given up on, and even Yamada, who had always left on time on Fridays... Everything worked out far too much in her favor. Then, there was the headache that got worse every time she tried to remember something.

“Although I wasn’t completely sure until I saw *that...*” *Should I be happy that I realized when I stepped on the scale?* The number on the scale had shown the ideal weight for Ryoko’s height, as if she were a supermodel—so much less than the weight she remembered. The moment she faced that impossibility, she recognized the irreconcilable difference between her perception and reality; that had broken through something within her, causing her to remember that she was now Herscherik.

Ryoko gave the fading Takanashi a smile. “Thank you for showing me a beautiful dream... Goodbye.” Just as she said this, everything except Ryoko and a small portion of the ground under her feet disintegrated into darkness.

Left alone, Ryoko held her head in her hand and let out a sigh. “Now what...? According to Mister Shiro, this should do it.” Ryoko recalled Shiro’s lesson on how to combat Mind Manipulation spells.

Shiro had explained first that one’s Magic, the armor of one’s mind, reduced the risk of succumbing to a Manipulation spell. Therefore, Herscherik’s lack of Magic Within left him practically defenseless against such an attack.

Then, he’d said, “If, by some chance, someone tries to brainwash you or trap you in an illusion... Hold fast to your sense of self, and don’t lose yourself in it.

Spells like that are inefficient to begin with, so the caster's Magic will run out sooner rather than later. Once that happens, find the core of the spell. Face it with determination and the spell will begin to unwind, then soon break."

Per Shiro's request, Ryoko had tried to will herself out of the illusion as soon as she knew she was trapped in a spell. When that didn't work, she tried pinching her cheek as hard as she could to no avail. In fact, the pain in her cheek was as vivid as it would have been in reality, much to her regret.

After that, she focused on finding the core of the spell, which turned out to be Takanashi—as she had expected. *This is probably something I wanted, deep down.* There was some part of her that wondered: if she had never died that night, she might have met someone, had a relationship, married, started a family... she might have had a normal life. While the dread of being separated from Kuro and Oran must have contributed, the spell had struck a weak point in her heart, a deep desire that even she didn't realize she had.

A world created from her own memory was a wonderfully comfortable place to be. But in the end, it was nothing more than an illusion. *There are things I have to do.* Ryoko took a deep breath, stroking the pocket watch with her thumb. "But what can I do now?"

Ryoko observed herself. Despite finding and destroying the core of the spell, she herself hadn't changed at all. In fact, the ground below was gradually closing in on her. That seemed bad. *Isn't the spell going to break? Is it programmed to kill the target when the spell fails? Or trap their mind forever?* That seemed very plausible. Almost *too* plausible, if Hoenir was the one behind it.

Just as cold sweat dripped down her face, the floor tilted. The next instant, the ground below her shattered. After a moment of weightlessness, Ryoko began descending into the darkness along with the shattered fragments of the illusion.

Just as Ryoko braced for the worst, the pocket watch began glowing in her hand. She closed her eyes against the brightness, then felt someone's arms around her, relieving her from the weightlessness.

When she opened her eyes, Ryoko was greeted by a face she hadn't seen in

quite a long time.

“I’m sorry I’m late, my liege.”

“Count... Ruseria?”

“Yes,” he smiled. He had a bold expression on his face, with neatly trimmed mustard-colored hair and a pair of indigo eyes Herscherik had never truly noticed before.



“You’ve broken a powerful Manipulation spell. Incredible.” Ruseria waved his hand and a floor materialized beneath them. He lowered Ryoko to her feet and examined her from head to toe.

Ryoko, through her confusion, knew that she had questions to ask but didn’t know where to start. After what seemed like a mental overload error, she blurted out the most trivial question of all. “You seem younger, Count. Were you always this young? Were you younger than me?”

Ruseria chuckled at this. “I wasn’t exactly in good shape when you met me. Now I only have my soul, so I must appear more my true age. I didn’t expect my liege to be a beautiful woman, either.” He showed a relaxed smile, which must have been how he normally looked.

Now that her confusion had subsided, she gave a sigh with a dramatic rise and fall of her shoulders. “I never thought I’d hear a word of flattery from you, Count. You must be disappointed that the adorable prince was just an old bag on the inside.”

“Not at all,” Count Ruseria countered, defying Ryoko’s self-deprecation. “No matter the appearance, you alone are my liege,” he said with all sincerity.

“Thank you...” Ryoko answered, somewhat embarrassed. At the same time, something clicked. “Oh. You’ve been sending me signs the entire time.” The fragments of Herscherik’s memories that had been nagging at Ryoko in the world of her desires had to have been Count Ruseria’s doing.

“I only assisted in creating a catalyst to unravel the spell. The rest was all your doing, Your Highness.”

Ryoko chuckled at being called ‘Your Highness’ in her thirty-five-year-old woman’s body. “Without your help, I don’t know where I’d be... My death was unexpected, so I still have family back there. Things I wish I had done...” Ryoko placed a hand over her chest. She had made up her mind to live her life as Herscherik, but at the same time, part of her still longed for her previous life. She expected that to continue as long as she was Herscherik. Even though that feeling would only weigh him down, it was a precious part of Ryoko that he could never truly let go.

“May I ask you a question, my liege?” the count asked. Ryoko saw his serious expression and straightened her back before nodding. “Why does Your Highness work so hard for the kingdom?”

“What do you mean, why?”

“Our world, compared to my liege’s home...” He could say no more. Through Ryoko’s memories, Ruseria had caught a glimpse of a world incredibly more prosperous than his—particularly in Japan. All were considered equal there, even despite the considerable gaps in wealth between individuals. It was involved in no bloody wars, murder only occurred infrequently, and all kinds of people had access to abundant light and food. Ruseria imagined that his world must have appeared awfully destitute to someone like Ryoko, who had lived a comfortable life in a world like that.

“Hmm...” Ryoko groaned. “I never really thought about it like that. I mean, I was born into that kingdom and grew up there. Isn’t it natural to want to help your homeland and family?” After much pondering, this was the only answer Ryoko could come up with.

Oh, that’s why... After Ryoko saying this like it was the most normal thing in the world, Ruseria nearly teared up from joy. He wondered how many people actually thought this way and acted on it.

The Count knelt on the spot and took Ryoko’s hand. He spoke, like a knight pledging an oath to a princess, “I can not imagine a better master than you, my liege. Meeting you has brought me more happiness than anything else in my life.”

“At least put me *after* your wife and child,” Ryoko countered. Then, she kneeled down herself, met the count’s eyes, and took his hand in hers. There was something she always wanted to tell him. “I’m glad that I met you, too, Count Ruseria. I was able to push myself because you sacrificed your life... I can’t thank you enough.” Then, a bitter expression crossed her face. “And there’s something I need to tell you.”

“My liege?”

“Count Grim, one of the men who engineered your death...”

“Oh, yes. Him...”

“Even though he was partially responsible for your death, he’s...” *Trying to change*, Ryoko almost said.

After meeting Count Grim at the New Year’s ball, Herscherik had investigated him in detail. While he wanted to trust Grim’s advice, he wasn’t naïve enough to do so without doing a great deal of research. In fact, Herscherik had suspected a trap.

But he was pleasantly surprised to discover that Count Grim was managing his land, which formally had belonged to Count Ruseria, quite positively. Count Grim was using his numerous connections for the betterment of his people. He had acquired seeds and fertilizer to grow crops in their poor soil, paved the travel road, eased up on taxes... In the end, his people were able to survive, even living comfortably, through the winter. Grim *was* trying to change. Moreover, he was showing deep remorse for what he had done and was trying to atone for it.

But now, Ryoko didn’t know what she expected Ruseria to do with that information. She couldn’t dare ask him to forgive Count Grim.

“Please don’t look so sad, my liege. I can’t forgive him after he took my wife and child away from me,” he said, causing Ryoko’s expression to fall even more. Ruseria gave her a smile. “But, you are also right, my liege. People *can* change. It’s true that he has committed terrible crimes, but his atonement for them has nothing to do with my hatred. If he took a good look at himself and decided to atone for his actions before falling to the Darkness Below, that’s a wonderful thing... In the end, I was more concerned with my own obsession and ultimately made the lives of my people worse. If they can find happiness in Grim’s rule, I couldn’t ask for more.”

Ryoko believed the Count’s words. “Thank you, Count Ruseria.”

“Nothing you should thank me for, my liege.” Just as Ruseria said so, Ryoko’s body began to faintly glow. “It’s almost time...” A sign that the spell was about to break. The Count took Ryoko’s hands, and stood.

“Count Ruseria...”

“Klaus. My name is Klaus Ruseria, my liege.”

Ryoko chuckled, just now realizing that she had never learned his first name.
“May I call you Klaus?”

“I am your subject, my liege. You may address me as you please.”

After a beat, Ryoko said with determination, “Klaus. I’m all right now.”

“What?”

“I have Kuro and Oran. And my family, too. So... you can go home to yours now.” Ryoko smiled a gentle smile.

Despite the difference in gender and appearance, Ruseria saw Herscherik’s familiar smile. *You really are kind to everyone... Even the dead.* That’s why people gathered around the prince, Klaus thought. Everyone saw a ray of hope in him. “If you don’t mind, I shall remain, my liege. My wife and son will wait for me.” *They would just tell me to see it through, since I got you into this,* he thought. *Especially that beautiful wife of mine.* “There will be more tribulations ahead, my liege. But I have faith that you will make it through.”

“Thank you, Klaus...” Ryoko said, and closed her eyes. She glowed brighter for a moment before the light disappeared, along with Ryoko herself.

Klaus was left alone in the utter darkness. “I have faith that you will conquer what lies ahead, my liege,” he muttered, before disappearing to be by Herscherik’s side, even though he could no longer see him.

Herscherik opened his eyes to find himself in a square room, its walls, floor, and ceiling all white. The only things in the room were a door and a shattered crystal sitting on a table. The height of his sightline looked familiar again, and he looked down at his hands. Much to his relief, they were small again.

Then, he turned to the broken crystal. “So this thing was controlling it all...” Herscherik picked up a fragment and peered into it. He could just barely make out a faint line of symbols, which he assumed to be a magical formula, that disappeared right before his eyes. *Sick bastard,* Herscherik silently cursed as he tossed the fragment aside and heard it shatter on the ground.

He had been able to give his thanks to Klaus, but he shuddered to imagine his mind still trapped in the spell. Without his mind, Herscherik would have become a soulless marionette. *The weapons, the drugs, and now a Manipulation spell. A living marionette and royalty with no Magic...* His hypothesis was swiftly becoming a theory, but there were still a few missing pieces.

Herscherik produced his pocket watch and checked the time. *Good. I haven't been in here that long.* His worst fear was that too much time had passed while he was under this spell. Herscherik faced the door before him—everyone was waiting for him beyond it.

I'll save you, Jeanne. Mister Shiro. I won't let him kill you! Herscherik tucked his watch back into his pocket and approached the door.

Chapter Ten: Noel, Hoenir, and the Ritual

White snow drifted gently through the air that day, like flower petals in the wind. A child with hair as white as the snow itself was reading a book that looked too complex for his age, curled up in a corner of his room like always.

Since the day he had been labeled a monster, this corner and the world of his books were the only escape offered to the child. Every time his parents' eyes fell on him, they would groan in annoyance. When he walked outside, the villagers feared him and children would even throw stones at him. Everyone who had been kind to him had completely changed their tune as soon as they discovered his abnormal powers.

The boy carefully turned the page as silently as he could, for fear of being scolded for the mere rustling of paper. Just as he finished turning the page, he heard the voice of a man and a woman from the adjoining room. The child set the book down, covered his ears, and pulled his knees into his chest before resting his head on them.

This man and woman, the child's parents, had been a loving couple until the day their son had been deemed a monster. Since then, they had constantly fought.

Once, the child tried to intervene, only to make the fight worse; his father had screamed that he was no son of his. "How is it that a kid like *that* could come from someone *normal* like me?!" his father had spat out, which had made his mother crumble into tears. Who could have blamed her, when her husband had essentially accused her of infidelity? And his father's words had left a scar just as deep on the boy's heart as it did on his mother's.

The boy always had a picturesque appearance, and was fair enough to be mistaken for a girl. He was unmistakably blessed by the goddess of beauty—particularly in his amber eyes. Despite his young age, words like 'beautiful' and 'elegant' fit him better than 'cute' or 'adorable.' Compared to him, his parents were run-of-the-mill. He was nothing like either of them. Even that had

remained merely a humorous quirk until their family had been completely turned upside down.

After watching his parents at each other's throats, the child stopped interacting with anyone if he could help it. He shut himself inside during the day to read books in the corner of his room, day in and day out.

Just before the boy would turn ten, a man came to him. It had been three years since the boy was first called a monster, and he had already resigned himself to spending his entire life reading books in that lonely corner of his room. The man had fearlessly lifted the child from his secluded little corner and asked for his name. When the boy answered that he was always just called a monster, the man chuckled and patted the child's hair.

"Then I shall call you Noel, henceforth."

That was the first meeting between Noel, the beautiful child, and Hoenir.

However, that comforting memory had been destroyed by the very person who had originally created it. "My dear little Noel." He smiled a sickeningly kind smile, riddled with madness.

Shiro awoke to a cold sensation on his forehead, and soon realized that he had been laid on the ground, face-down. He tried to push himself up, but couldn't move his arms. In fact, he couldn't move a muscle, as if his entire body would not obey his command.

Where am I...? Shiro managed to move his eyes enough to glance around the room. It was dimly lit with very few sources of lighting. He saw the statue of the creator god rising up before him and guessed that he must be in the chapel deep within the cathedral.

Then, he spotted an inscription on the floor that seemed out of place with his location. *Formulas...? No, there are too many. A Magic Circle?* A Magic Circle was composed of several magical formulas which interacted with each other to produce a powerful effect. It was one of the lost technologies thought to have been used in the Ancient Era. Spellcasters had repeatedly researched and experimented with the art, much as they did with combining spells, all to no avail. Shiro couldn't comprehend how he could possibly be staring at a Magic

Circle, here and now.

“Good morning, Noel,” *he* said, interrupting Shiro’s thoughts. He grabbed Shiro’s arm and flipped him onto his back. Seeing that same old smile almost made Shiro feel like maybe this had all been a dream or illusion... But his curse-bound body, on the other hand, was screaming at him that the real illusion here was that kind smile on the man’s face. “Oh, you can’t speak... It’s all right now, Noel.” Hoenir stroked his forehead, just as he’d done when Shiro was a child.

A portion of Shiro’s body was released from the curse. He tried to speak, but only dry gasps came out, his cracked lips quivering. Fear began to come over him, like the sensation of a python slowly coiling around his body from the feet up.

Even still, Shiro had to ask, “Why...?” Hoenir had been so kind to him. He had always accepted him. Had it all been a lie? With a single word, Shiro had asked all of this.

“Why? For the sake of our world,” Hoenir answered with a tender smile, as if he was teaching a lesson to a beloved child. “The world is drowning in great sorrow and lament. Our once perfect, *united* world, crafted by Saint Ferris, is now divided by war, resulting in horrific bloodshed. And those who do not suffer the ravages of conflict are crushed by poverty.”

Gracis Kingdom was a world power that shared the continent with the Empire to the west, the Militant State to the east, and the Federation to the south, as well as numerous smaller nations. Beyond the sea lay more continents and smaller islands, all with their own nations. There even supposedly existed a continent ruled by magical creatures. The perfect world of peace that Saint Ferris had envisioned was nowhere to be found. In the present world, the larger nations ruled the smaller, the powerful few ruled the powerless masses, and the strong ruled the weak.

“We must correct the world that has gone astray,” Hoenir concluded in a calm voice. “Don’t you agree, Prince Herscherik?” And then, the Archbishop turned around.

Shiro followed Hoenir’s gaze to find the prince who had given him that name fixing a piercing glare at Hoenir without a trace of his usual gentleness.

“I see Mister Shiro... Now where’s Jeanne?” Herscherik demanded. He had always employed proper etiquette—even when talking to Barbosse, he was careful to maintain a polite demeanor even as he cursed at him internally. Of course, his men of service would describe him putting on an immaculate performance. But now, Herscherik ignored everything Hoenir had to say and simply demanded an answer.

“Prince Herscherik, no need to rush—”

“Do your ears work, or are they strictly for decoration? I asked you where Jeanne is.”

Hoenir shrugged at Herscherik’s stoicism and signaled to one of the clergymen stationed at the corner of the room. The clergyman disappeared through a small door beside him before returning with a copper-haired woman, her eyes fixed on the ground.

“Jeanne!” Herscherik called, prompting Jeanne to lift her head. He had seen her only a few days prior, but she seemed so sickly compared to before. Her delicate arms were tied behind her back. Coupled with the dirt stains on her clothes, it forced Herscherik to face the fact that Jeanne was being held against her will.

“Prince Herscherik!” Jeanne called with a faint tone of joy. But her expression soon clouded, and she shouted with desperation, “You must run, Prince Herscherik! They’re going to—!”

“Shut up!”

Her plea was cut short by a strike across her cheek. Jeanne’s frail body tumbled to the ground.

“Don’t you dare touch her!” Herscherik couldn’t help but shout. He felt a flame of rage erupt within him. He tightened his fists and gritted his teeth in an attempt to quell the fiery emotion. *Calm down*, he told himself. *If I lose it now, I’m giving him exactly what he wants. Jeanne and Mister Shiro are both alive. This is different from earlier.* Unlike Klaus, these two were still alive. Unlike Baron Armin, they hadn’t yet been backed into a corner they could not escape from.

Herscherik kept telling himself that there was still time to save them. He took one deep breath in, then out. In the process, he forced the rage from his body. He would lose any chance of winning this fight if he let Hoenir make him lose his cool. *Now I know they're both alive. I just need to buy some time.* Once he did, Kuro and Oran would come to their rescue. Moreover, his brothers would arrive with the Royal Guard. *If my guess is right, Hoenir won't kill me right away.*

As Herscherik controlled his anger and calculated how to buy time, Hoenir called out, "Let us strike a deal, Your Highness. In exchange, I will return this young lady to you."

Herscherik stared Hoenir down. "You want me to carry the banner of your revolution?"

"I must say, I am shocked," Hoenir said, impressed. He looked Herscherik up and down as if to calculate his value.

"It was just a guess until I heard your conversation with Shiro..." That had ultimately solidified Herscherik's conjecture. "Your Holiness, Archbishop Hoenir, leader of the zealots of Saint Ferris." The Church was separated into numerous factions, but one in particular, the believers of Saint Ferris, had the most capacity for violence.

"Zealots? We are merely devoted followers of Saint Ferris, and we are different from others who do nothing but preach empty sermons. We have been waiting for the right time, for the sake of all who share this world... That time is now," Hoenir rattled on with a completely self-satisfied tone that showed he had no doubt about his moral superiority.

This is bad, Herscherik silently groaned. People who never doubted themselves were some of the most dangerous, ferocious, and fearless people. Hoenir was a zealot, and he knew exactly what he was doing.

Hoenir stepped away from Shiro and approached Herscherik, who stood on guard. Then, the archbishop knelt and reached out his hand. "Prince Herscherik. We have all been waiting for someone like you," he said, as if he was reciting holy scripture. "All of the good deeds you have done around the nation... absolutely magnificent. There is no one else like you—a young but wise prince with kindness in his heart to put the people first. Your Highness was born to

rule... Please, Your Highness—lead us, and the rest of the world!”

Hoenir stared up at Herscherik with passion in his eyes and continued. “The world and Saint Ferris himself longs for this rotten nation to be rebuilt under your rule, which will lead to a reunion of the world. In this way we shall also require the least amount of sacrifice.”

“Sacrifice, huh?” Herscherik couldn’t help but snicker at how cold his words sounded, in a manner unbecoming of his age. His smirk intimidated Shiro and Jeanne almost as much as Hoenir’s mad smile.

Hoenir, however, took this reply as an affirmative. “Your Highness, as unfortunate as it is, saving the masses will require sacrifice. Surely Your Highness understands the importance of mitigating this sacrifice of the people in the process of saving the rest of the world?” Hoenir passionately continued, with a manic gleam in his eyes.

Herscherik did see some merit in what Hoenir was saying. Those who led would sooner or later be faced with decisions about what to achieve and what needed to be sacrificed. He had already learned the hard way how difficult it was to achieve everything while sacrificing nothing.

“Saving the most while sacrificing the least. That is the duty of the chosen.”

“You say *I’m* the chosen one?”

Hoenir nodded. “Who else but Your Highness...? My liege,” Hoenir sweetly whispered as if to a lover.

Herscherik groaned in annoyance. “Can you not? Don’t call me that. It’s revolting,” Herscherik answered with an icy tone and glare that stood in stark contrast to Hoenir’s ecstatic calm. Herscherik wouldn’t allow him to address him in the same manner as his closest confidants; hearing those words out of Hoenir’s mouth made them seem tainted.

The prince continued, still as cold as before, “What you need is someone from the royal bloodline with a commoner mother whom the people can more easily accept. Not me.” *My heritage isn’t the only thing keeping me from being your ideal candidate, either,* he silently added. *Fortune may have favored the bold, but it came with a price.*

For the most part, Herscherik's operations had been a success. He had helped the people while drawing the attention of both the minister and the Church. Sadly, it seemed it had been a little *too* effective. He had become more popular with the public than he had expected. Even though he made sure to swear everyone involved to secrecy, there was no way to put a lid on gossip. Before he knew it, people were telling stories about him and traveling theater troupes reenacted his adventurous tales. Even children played pretend as the prince and his men. The people had suffered greatly from oppressive rule, and they longed for salvation and reform more than he'd realized.

Herscherik guessed that, if he were to become the banner of the revolution, it would more than likely succeed.

"If Your Highness understands that, then..."

"No. I will never be a symbol for your revolution." Herscherik shot Hoenir's hopeful proposal down. When revolutions happened, royalty were the first ones on the chopping block. Agreeing could very well kill his family, whom he wanted to protect more than anyone.

Hoenir shrugged, as if he was dealing with an obstinate child. "Your Highness, I had hoped that—"

"You knew what my answer would be," Herscherik interrupted. That's why Hoenir had prepared that trap, after all. "The Manipulation spell." Herscherik watched Hoenir react to the phrase and lowered his arm. Now, Herscherik was sure of it. "You're a Divine Spellcaster, but you also use Manipulation spells. You set that trap in order to take control of me."

Just before Herscherik left for the cathedral, Eutel had come to him after making preparations for his charge on the Church.

"Hoenir and I have something in common. I can smell it."

Herscherik kept his initial reaction of *You're both secretly ruthless spitfires?* to himself and awaited Eutel's explanation, even though he was secretly nervous about Eutel's excited grin, as if he had read Herscherik's mind.

"I think he uses Manipulation magic. Divine healing spells require intricate Magic control anyway. I wouldn't be surprised, knowing how potent his healing

magic is, if he was also skilled in that.” Eutel then patted Herscherik’s head, with much concern in his tone. “Mind Manipulation and Curses in particular are spells that prey on weaknesses in your heart. One small opening could cost you your life... Be careful.”

Eutel was right. Herscherik had fallen right into Hoenir’s spell. Without Klaus, he might have been trapped forever.

“You knew I would turn you down. That’s why you set a trap for me. Pretty words won’t do you any good now—they’re all paper thin.”

Hoenir sighed, realizing that any more talk wouldn’t serve his cause. “I was hoping His Highness, in his wisdom, would *understand*.”

“Wisdom? You really have a knack for making compliments sound sarcastic.” *I’ve just got a little more knowledge and experience than most*, he silently added. *So far, everything’s come along as planned*, he thought—except for him falling for a trap along the way.

That being said, Herscherik was still troubled by something. “Hoenir. Do you really believe that your faction has the power to achieve a revolution?” The few missing pieces in Herscherik’s understanding of the situation warned him of danger. Hoenir might be zealous, but he was still a calculating individual, and Herscherik didn’t believe for a second that he hadn’t anticipated this. He had to have some kind of absolute trump card. “What else are you hiding...?” Herscherik asked. “What are you trying to do to Mister Shiro?”

Herscherik had thought it strange that Shiro had not moved from his place inside the strange patterns on the floor. He assumed that Shiro *could* not, as he lacked his usual look of indifference, instead staring at him like a frightened child. Herscherik had always thought that, if Shiro had actually been ordered by Hoenir to manipulate the prince to their cause, he would have acted a little more friendly. By contrast, Shiro had always acted withdrawn, and never once even tried to fake a smile. He intimidated people with his appearance and kept on guard like a prideful cat.

Herscherik, however, saw that Shiro was actually afraid of others, protecting himself with that intimidating facade. Unlike Hoenir or even Herscherik, Shiro wasn’t the deceitful type.

Hoenir took advantage of Mister Shiro. Herscherik was disgusted by Hoenir's actions—he had always lurked in the shadows. First with Baron Armin, then with Shiro, and now he was trying to use Herscherik as the figurehead of his revolution. Just like Barbosse, he used others until they no longer served his purpose, then cast them aside.

“Is Mister Shiro part of the ‘sacrifice,’ too?”

Hoenir didn't answer that question, but his silence was confirmation enough.

Shiro, who had been listening to the conversation, felt his vision blur. The archbishop had been the only one to help him... the only one to accept him. He was the only one who had dared to take his hand when everyone else saw Shiro as a monster. *Even if he was just using me...* Shiro would have let the whole world hate him. He would have defied the gods. He would have gladly given his life to Hoenir... before he betrayed him.

But now, Shiro knew that Hoenir had never believed in him from the start. That's why Hoenir had laid this curse on him. *No one ever believed in me, after all... No one has ever needed me.* Tears rolled down his cheeks. Shiro couldn't tell if he felt sorrow, hatred, or resignation—he simply couldn't stop the tears from coming.

“Whatever. I really don't care what you think,” the prince said, sounding even more annoyed than before. He stared down Hoenir. “Let Mister Shiro and Jeanne go. If you're going to threaten this country... If you're going to get in the way of my goal, I'll take you out.”

Herscherik's determined declaration had stopped Shiro's tears.

“Goal...?” Hoenir asked.

Herscherik smiled a dauntless smile, quite unlike the icy smirk he showed earlier or his usual expression of childlike innocence. “Everything... I will get *everything* I want.” His family, his people, his country... and his world. He would achieve a world where no one suffered from injustice. Where hard work paid off. Where everyone had a chance at happiness and a right to hope.

Herscherik knew that it would be almost impossible for everyone to be happy. Happiness meant different things for different people. But, he thought it might

just be possible for everyone to have hope for tomorrow. That was the country—and the world—that Herscherik longed for. He knew full well that this was an idealistic goal—perhaps even wishful thinking.

Even so, he couldn't help but long for that. He didn't want to regret anything ever again, and he would never change anything without first *wanting* change.

"Hoenir. You said saving the masses required sacrifice. I understand that." No matter how hard he tried, he always knew there was a chance of losing people along the way. But for him, that was a tragedy to be prevented as much as possible—unlike Hoenir, who expected there to be "necessary sacrifice." Essentially, the archbishop had given up on his allies and followers from the start. "Saving the masses with minimal sacrifice? I don't want to hear someone like you, who's already given up on saving everyone, talk about 'the masses.' Your victory would be built on their corpses."

"Do you propose to save this nation—this world—without any sacrifice? You must realize how unrealistic that is... Can that approach really change this rotten nation?" Hoenir spat out in half exasperation and half anger.

Herscherik considered that question in earnest. "That's what I want, no matter what anyone says. It's not for anyone else, either. For my own sake, I will achieve everything I have set out to do." The thought of doing something for his family, people, or entire country seemed virtuous enough, but Herscherik knew deep down that *he* wanted to help his father, to protect his family, and to see his people smile. This was the conclusion he reached precisely because he couldn't bring himself to give up on anyone. All of this was to satisfy his own desires.

"How *greedy*."

"Greedy? You said it, Hoenir!" Herscherik loudly declared. "If giving up on sacrificing the few to save the many is the right thing to do, then I'll be greedy. I'll take the wrong way." Why should he give up before giving it his all? Herscherik had things to do before he reached that point. There were things he could change. As long as he didn't give up, he could always find a way to move forward.

Hoenir shook his head in resignation, looking down at him. His eyes had lost

their mad passion, and they were now devoid of emotion. “It seems I overestimated you... I’m sorry we could not reach an understanding.”

“Understandings are between people on equal footing. *This* is called blackmail, by the way... So you’ve realized you can’t make use of me. Now what?”

“Now? I return to my original plan.” Just as Hoenir said so, the clergymen, six of them in all, who had been standing aside spread around the room, stationing themselves on points along the circle on the floor below Shiro.

“What’s going to happen now?” Herscherik asked, as he quickly looked around the room.

Hoenir smiled and raised his arm, prompting each of the clergymen to take out a magical item. Herscherik could feel the air in the room shift. His palms started to sweat at the tangible tension in the air, like a balloon filled to its limit and threatening to burst.

Hoenir, as if to mock Herscherik’s reaction, maintained his icy look and frozen smile. “I wanted to use Your Highness to take control of this nation first. Even though it is rotten to the core, its influence and military could have been useful... But I don’t expect to unify the world with one single nation, no matter how powerful.”

“And so...?”

Hoenir spread his arms towards the statue of the creator god. “So I am going to build my ultimate weapon. Let us begin the ritual to create a god!”

At Hoenir’s call, the clergymen began their incantation, materializing formulas around them. Their incantations intertwined to form a powerful chorus, and the markings on the floor started to glow, flooding the room with a whirlwind of color as bright as the midday sun.

Shiro still lay in the center of the markings. Light began to shimmer around him as a gust of wind lifted his body into the air. Layers of magical formula materialized in ribbons of light, wrapping around Shiro. When the light became even brighter, Shiro screamed in agony as if he was being torn apart.

“Mister Shiro!” Herscherik had never imagined a scream like that could

possibly come from Shiro, who now clasped his chest as his white hair shimmered to reflect the colors of the incantations, dancing in the wind. Herscherik tried to rush over, but was stopped by an invisible wall—most likely a magical barrier—that stood around the magic circle. Still, Herscherik jumped to his feet and slammed his fists against the invisible wall, shouting Shiro’s name.

Shiro didn’t respond, and the barrier remained. His agonized screams faded away as his body relaxed entirely, as if he had finally run out of strength.

Herscherik snapped back to Hoenir, glaring at him. “What are you doing to Mister Shiro, Hoenir?!”

“The Ritual of Transcendence, Your Highness.”

“Transcendence?” Herscherik parroted the unfamiliar word.

“Do you know what Djinns are, Your Highness?”

Herscherik understood that Djinns were beings that held more Magic than any human possibly could and lived unconfined by mortality. Herscherik had only ever thought of them as a myth or fairytale.

“Djinns are superior beings, compared to humans,” Hoenir explained. “With its incredible Magic, a single one can annihilate a nation in the blink of an eye. Their power rivals that of the gods.”

Now, the missing pieces fell into place in Herscherik’s mind. The drug that improved physical strength, Shiro’s power to convert and amplify Floating Magic, and now the Ritual of Transcendence. *Leaking the drug’s formula, putting it out into circulation... The death of Oran’s fiancée, Baron Armin... Everything was leading up to this moment.*

Herscherik felt his blood run cold as he finally connected the dots.

“Yes, Your Highness,” Hoenir said as if he was commending a child for doing well in his studies. “Very perceptive. Indeed, this ritual will transcend Noel into a Djinn.”

Herscherik gritted his teeth as his wildest imaginings became reality. He had only been a small piece of Hoenir’s plan—something that would have only

made things more convenient for him. The main focus of his scheme, the one element Hoenir could not go without, had been Shiro all along. With him, he would have the power to unite the world.

“But... Shiro would never listen to you.” Herscherik couldn’t imagine that, human or Djinn, Shiro would ever obey Hoenir after how he had been treated. Herscherik wouldn’t be surprised if Shiro decided to annihilate everyone in this room the instant he gained his powers.

“That’s why I cast another spell on him. A curse, cast by calling his name day after day.” That curse had become binding chains, controlling Shiro and his overwhelming Magic. In fact, even as Shiro writhed in agony, he found himself unable to escape. “Now that he is suffering, drugged, and overwhelmed with Magic... I only need to make him transcend in order to use him as my puppet.”

“Curse or not, you can’t completely control him with a Manipulation spell!”

“Correct,” Hoenir agreed. “It *is* difficult to control someone, and even when it is possible, it does not last very long. This is because,” he added as if he was giving a lecture, “people have their own minds.” Just as Herscherik had done, these spells could be broken with determination and willpower, even by someone without Magic. “But what if their mind is broken?” Hoenir cackled heartily. “You only need to point a Mind Manipulation spell at the right scar in a person’s heart to break their mind with ease.”

Hoenir continued with a dark smile that would make anyone shudder. “Once a mind is broken and lost, that person is nothing but a marionette. While I regret that I failed to turn you into one, Your Highness, I still have Noel. And that is all I need. I will control that monster once it becomes a Djinn and unite the world like Saint Ferris before us!” Hoenir made his declaration, his robe fluttering in the whirlwind of light. He had not a shred of doubt that everything would go according to his plan.

Herscherik felt anger burning inside him at Hoenir’s speech. “How dare you...?” Hoenir had called Shiro a *puppet*. That was the key to his plan—everything else could have been cast aside. Even Shiro himself was nothing but an object to Hoenir. “Mister Shiro loved you!” Herscherik was enraged by Hoenir’s betrayal of Shiro’s devotion to him. Even though he didn’t often show

it, Shiro considered Hoenir his true father, enough that his icy expression would melt ever so slightly into a smile at the sight of him. But this man had decided to sacrifice Shiro from the start, utterly betraying him.

“Yes—all according to plan,” Hoenir confirmed with a smile. “I played the role of a perfect father to that monster for seven years so I could betray it at the most opportune moment. Now, there is still some time left before the ritual is complete, but I need your assistance with one more thing, Your Highness.” Hoenir drew a dagger from his robe. “I need Your Highness to die in front of my puppet.”

Herscherik turned to run, but Hoenir grabbed hold of his arm. As he struggled to get free, Hoenir tightened his grip around Herscherik from behind, holding the dagger against his cheek. He was completely pinned.

“I thought that my actions alone may not be enough to fully break its mind,” Hoenir whispered into Herscherik’s ear, close enough that one might even mistake it for an amorous gesture. “I thought that I may need one more thing to ensure that it was fully destroyed. Luckily, I found you,” he continued to whisper to the immobilized Herscherik. “I first approached you for the exact reason you’ve deduced. *That* is the last card up my sleeve. But I was blessed with unexpected fortune, which assures me that Saint Ferris is watching,” Hoenir gleefully exclaimed. “That creature never opened up to anyone but you.”

“Huh?” Herscherik blurted out, despite being held tight with his life on the line. Sure, he had a few lengthy conversations with Shiro, but if that was his standard for “opening up” to someone, Shiro was more catlike than any fictional character Herscherik could recall.

“If I could control you, it would have obeyed me without the use of magic,” Hoenir added. He must have been working to ensure that Herscherik and Shiro would cross paths.

“You approached Eutel...”

“To contact you. Which was a difficult task, thanks to those princes. I was forced to use my followers within the castle.”

Herscherik gritted his teeth, but there was more on his mind. “That accident

in the test field, too.”

“Oh, I made sure to cover my tracks, but you’ve finally noticed,” Hoenir confirmed with the same boldness.

After the accident, Kuro had used Sigel’s findings to track the source of the materials, only to discover that they were the same as the ones delivered to the castle for various magical items commissioned by the Church through several nobles and merchants. After noticing the mass purchase of weapons, they had been planning to restrain the person responsible at the Church under the guise of a criminal investigation—but Hoenir had beaten them to it.

“If Shiro and I hadn’t been there...”

“Some lives might have been lost to the cause. But I was able to take advantage of that to keep *it* close to you. That coincidence had allowed my plan to progress rather smoothly.”

If Shiro had not been there, the triplets might have been injured or killed. Everyone there, for that matter, could have died.

“And you call yourself a priest...”

“All for the people of the world, under the guidance of Saint Ferris,” Hoenir said with absolute assurance. He turned to Shiro, still holding Herscherik fast. “Look here, Noel.” With that command, Shiro—who had continued to absorb vast amounts of Magic as the ritual progressed—slowly turned his head towards them. His eyes fell on Herscherik and opened wide in surprise.

“When you die,” Hoenir whispered, “and when that *thing* loses all hope... My Djinn will be complete.”

Herscherik felt a stab of pain in his cheek; Hoenir must have cut him with the dagger. But Herscherik neither screamed nor begged for his life. He simply held his head up.

Hoenir shrugged at the lack of a reaction. “Not even a single tear. It won’t be as effective if you don’t show some sign of fear... But I’m running out of time. Unfortunately, this is where our paths part.” Hoenir raised the dagger above his head...

“Goodbye, Prince Herscherik.”

And with that, he swung the dagger down.

A few minutes before this, a woman opened her differently-colored eyes on the couch in a dimly-lit room where she'd dozed off and sat up straight. “This...” she muttered as she waved her hand, causing a round mirror-like object to materialize.

Instead of a reflection, however, the object showed something quite different. Herscherik, if he had been in the room, might have called it a sci-fi hologram. But the prince was not in the room, nor was anyone else who might have questioned the nature of the object.

The Oracle, the Djinn known as the Eternal Witch to those familiar to her, gulped at the sight on the screen. “How can something like that exist *now*...?” She saw a Magic Circle that had no business existing in the current day. Then, she spotted a young man in the middle of the Circle, as well as a figure in a robe clutching the little prince she had met earlier.

Then, cracks ran through the mirror, shattering the thing into fragments that dissolved into thin air. The Eternal Witch's eyes widened. “Sabotaged...” Then, she shook her head in resignation as she sank back onto the couch.

While she had the power to foresee the future, the information she received from her visions were fragmented and uncertain. The future was always on the brink of changing from someone's actions. In fact, she had not foreseen this future at all when she had last seen Prince Herscherik. Even the immortal being with abundant Magic was not all-powerful. Even her clairvoyance would shut down when someone more powerful than her came into the mix.

Who...? And why...? But I'm not allowed to... A Magic Circle that should not have existed in this time had been activated. Something about this world was changing. The Witch knew that much, but her role prevented her from taking any further actions.

“The only ones who can change their destiny are those chosen by it... Apparently, Destiny has no plans to let him live a boring life.” The Eternal Witch stared into the air. There was a cruel future fast approaching the prince, but she

had no way of telling him that.

Chapter Eleven: The Inevitable, Bloodshed, and Loss

Through the agony wracking his body and the intricate formulas materializing around him, Shiro could feel that he was being reconstructed into something inhuman. The enormous amount of Floating Magic harvested by the Magic Circle was being further amplified and poured into him, expanding his personal reserves of Magic as well. The sheer volume of Magic would have destroyed any ordinary human body from the inside as their capacity for Magic was overwhelmed. Shiro, on the other hand, could feel his body taking in every single drop of Magic.

He couldn't even scream as the pain became all-consuming, but a part of him still calmly observed what was happening to him. *Will I become... a true monster?* he sardonically thought. *I've been called that more times than I can count. What difference will it make if I really become one now?* In fact, it seemed easier just to let go of his mind and suffering, resigning himself to being Hoenir's puppet.

Or should I use my power to destroy everything? The world had beaten him down all of his life. *Why shouldn't I tear it to shreds?* Shiro thought with reckless anger. Differences in birth, appearance, ability... All of those things were mere personal qualities on a small scale, but society had somehow come to see them as unbearable. Things that might have been merely differences were perceived as threats. Shiro wondered why he was persecuted for his differences while others were accepted for theirs, and why the world was so cruel to him.

As he felt dark emotions overtaking him, he began to drift towards them—until a voice stopped him.

"Mister Shiro *loved* you!" the peculiar little prince cried. The blond-haired, green-eyed prince considered himself lesser than those around him, but was never insecure about it. He had always had a positive outlook. Even though he couldn't wield any magic, he was passionate in his studies and always eager to learn.

After some time, Shiro had begun to look forward to their semi-weekly tutoring sessions.

“Look at me, Noel.”

Hoenir’s residual Magic within him forced his body to move. Shiro saw Hoenir beyond the illuminated Magic Circle, holding a small figure hostage. The dagger in Hoenir’s hand had marked a line on his cheek. Blood spilled from the wound, soaking half of the prince’s face. While he did not speak nor beg for help, his eyes showed that he was refusing to give up. Hoenir lifted the dagger to end his life.

The time Shiro spent with the prince came to him in a flash. The prince saying he was sorry for mistaking him for a woman. The prince passionately studying magic. The prince trying to talk to him, even when Shiro was cold towards him. The little prince looking at him with admiration, not fear, when seeing his powers. He had always spoken with determination unbecoming of his age. “Mister Shiro,” the prince had begun calling him without permission after he refused to give out his name.

Now, that same prince was about to be taken from him forever.

No! Something inside him shattered. Just as Shiro realized that the Magic that had been confining him had broken, he used his own Magic, as well as the constant influx of Floating Magic, to calculate a formula. *Target: All living creatures except for myself, the prince—and that woman, while I’m at it. Range: this room. At the same time, construct a formula to break the barrier...* Using all Magic available to him, Shiro instantly constructed complex formulas with barely any incantation. The very act served as a testament to his inhumanity, but Shiro didn’t care.

As soon as the formulas were complete, the spell activated. The ribbons of magical formulas that made up the Magic Circle around him dissipated, depositing Shiro back on his feet. At the same time, the powerful barrier was destroyed, and a gust of wind charged towards the targets of the spell, slamming them against the wall.

As the clergymen groaned and fell to the floor, Hoenir—having been thrown against the wall—beheld Shiro as his consciousness slipped away. The creature

had broken the curse he'd so carefully cast over years, and now stood adorned with brilliant light and goddess-like beauty.

I didn't expect him to break my curse and use a spell to... No, Hoenir reconsidered. The thing he truly had not expected was for Noel to attack him. Even if it had been false, he *had* raised the boy. Even if the boy was going to attack him, Hoenir had expected him to at least hesitate.

But Shiro *didn't* hesitate. He chose the prince, whom he had spent mere months with, over his own father. Hoenir recalled how it had taken him several years to earn Shiro's trust. The prince had easily accomplished all that and more in a fraction of the time. Hoenir realized that from the moment he had tried to use the prince, the moment he had overreached in his attempt to solidify his plan...

"I was doomed to fail," Hoenir muttered, and fell unconscious.

Herscherik, now released from Hoenir's grasp, saw that the archbishop was motionless on the floor. He wiped the blood from his cheeks and turned around. "Thank you, Mister Shiro..." he said, then saw that Shiro, despite having broken the curse, was still standing within the active Magic Circle.

"Mister Shiro!" he called. "Why?! You've knocked them all out!" Shiro's spell had rendered all of the clergymen and Hoenir himself unconscious. Even still, the ritual continued; in fact, the room was brighter than before, wind raging through the entire space.

"Prince Herscherik!" Jeanne shouted, running over to them. She had somehow been released from the ropes that had been binding her.

Herscherik glanced at her wrists and noticed a thin red line across the marks the ropes had left on her skin. Jeanne must have had a hidden knife on her that allowed to cut through her bonds on her own.

"He's the core of the spell," she continued, "so—"

"She's right. This won't stop... until I'm a Djinn or dead. One or the other. Besides, now that the Spellcasters who were controlling the spell have been knocked out, I doubt the ritual will even conclude properly. At worst, it might overload and take this entire cathedral with it."

Shiro's assessment was calculated, despite the fact that his life was on the line. The pain had subsided, but he was still unable to move in any direction, perhaps bound by the effect of the Magic Circle. Besides, there was even more Floating Magic rushing into him, and he could feel it modifying him as he spoke. Either from the side effect of the drug he had been dosed with or as a result of expending all of his own Magic for a complex spell, Shiro was now unable to craft another formula.

I never thought I'd actually be unable to cast magic... He had always used magic as naturally as breathing, so Shiro found his current predicament curious. He had never expected it to come to this. He was also curious about who had taught Hoenir about those high-level formulas and in particular the Magic Circle, which was unknown in the current day. But more than anything else, he was curious about Herscherik.

The prince, who had maintained his calm expression with a dagger at his throat, now seemed shocked. Seeing Herscherik's face, Shiro felt a sense of contentment. He was now sure that the little prince was the only one who had ever truly accepted him. That made him realize what he had to do, even if it would cost him his life.

"Get out of here, now," Shiro said. "I'll seal away as much Magic as I can." By using his own life, Shiro thought that he could at least limit the explosion radius without the use of any formulas. *No*, he thought with resolve. *I have to do this.*

"Seal away, and then what...? Don't tell me you're going to blow yourself up!" Herscherik desperately wanted Shiro to deny it.

He didn't. Shiro quietly smiled, for the first time that Herscherik had ever seen. A divine smile like that of the goddess of beauty, but somehow tragically frail.

Herscherik lost himself in that beauty for a moment before snapping out of it. "I won't let you do it... Never!" he cried. *What do I do? What can I do?*

One thing he wasn't going to do was give up. Herscherik wasn't going to accept any sacrifice as a foregone conclusion. He had declared that much to Hoenir. Racking his brain to remember what Hoenir and Shiro had said, along with his own meager knowledge of magic, he guessed that the Magical Circle

was used to gather Floating Magic and pour it into Shiro, which would eventually transform him into a Djinn. *If that Magic doesn't go into Shiro, then...*

A light bulb flashed on inside his head. Herscherik produced the silver pocket watch—an ancient relic, imbued with powers just as extraordinary as Shiro's. Herscherik thought the watch might be able to steal away some of the overwhelming Magic concentrated on Shiro. It was a gamble. Herscherik didn't know if it would work at all, or if his Magic-less body could withstand such a thing. But it was the only chance he had to save Shiro.

"Jeanne... You have to run." It was a dangerous gambit, so Herscherik wanted to at least get Jeanne out of there.

Jeanne, however, shook her head. "No, Prince Herscherik. I will always remain by your side." Jeanne smiled sweetly.

"Thank you..." Herscherik couldn't find anything else to say. He held his pocket watch tight. "I'll save you, Shiro—I promise. Don't give up."

And with that, Herscherik stepped into the Magic Circle. He was able to, since the barrier had been destroyed, but something that felt like static electricity stung his skin as he did so, making him wince. Still, Herscherik approached Shiro step by step. As he grew closer to the center of the Circle where Shiro stood, the shocking pain intensified. Herscherik gritted his teeth to bear it as beads of sweat ran down his face and dripped into the wound on his cheek, causing a sharp sting.

"Stop..." Shiro muttered, but Herscherik ignored him as he walked forward. "Stop it, please!" Shiro implored, seeing Herscherik inching closer as his face twisted in pain. "You don't have to suffer like this!"

"Shut up!" Herscherik shouted back, and then gave a smile to reassure Shiro. "I'm selfish, you know. I'm not going to give up on anyone." A whirlwind erupted from where Shiro stood as the light was refracted and magnified. Bracing to keep himself from being blown away, Herscherik took another step forward. "So...!" And another. "Trust me, Shiro!"

Finally, Herscherik stood an arm's length from Shiro. He extended his hand with the silver pocket watch clutched in it. *Please, pocket watch... Klaus!* As if to answer Herscherik's silent plea, the watch glowed brighter than it had ever

before. As he did, he could feel Magic flowing into him—and not the miniscule amount of Magic the watch normally granted him. The flood of Magic made his vision swim. As Herscherik faltered, dizzy, he felt someone steady him.

“Stay strong, Prince Herscherik.”

“Jeanne...” Herscherik tilted his head back to see her, embracing him from behind. Jeanne looked weak, but her face still showed a smile. She wrapped her hand around Herscherik’s, so that they both were clutching the pocket watch together. “Thank you, Jeanne.” Herscherik tightened his grip on the watch. Overwhelming Magic poured into him, threatening to obliterate his consciousness, but Herscherik stood fast. *I will not give up.*

The Magic Circle flashed brightly in a silent explosion of light.

A world of snow expanded before his eyes. He stepped out of his house, Hoenir leading him by the hand. Then, he turned around to look at the man and the woman who watched them leave.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry...” the woman cried, and crumbled. The man held her. Both of their faces were blurred as if by clouds of mist.

Oh. That’s right. Shiro remembered now. This was a memory that had he been suppressing until now. His parents, ultimately, were only human—not strong enough to withstand the malice of those around him. They took it out on their son to protect themselves. It was still inexcusable, since they had forsaken their duty to protect and nurture their child, but... Shiro also recognized that, if he had remained in that environment, none of them would have made it. In the end, Shiro believed that his parents truly had felt something other than hatred for him, deep down.

When Shiro opened his eyes, he saw the blond-haired, green-eyed prince peering down at him with concern on his face. “Are you all right, Mister Shiro? Do you recognize me?”

“Herscherik...” he answered.

Herscherik smiled in relief. “And thank you, Jeanne.” He began to help Shiro

sit up. “How is your hand?”

“It’s all right, Prince Herscherik,” she reassured him as she sat on the floor.

When the three took a moment to catch their breath, the door flew open.

“Are you hurt, Hersch?!” Oran, soaked with blood from head to toe, stormed in with Kuro leaning on his shoulder. When he saw that Herscherik, as well as the other two, were safe and that the rest of the room were incapacitated, he sighed in relief.

“Are you two... hurt?” Herscherik asked. The blood-soaked Oran and lethargic Kuro didn’t inspire confidence.

Oran smiled in return. “Hm? I’m not hurt, but the dog’s having trouble moving. He’s been poisoned. Thought I’d bring him here to you.”

Despite his dreadful appearance soaked in the blood of his enemies, Oran had defeated the Templars without a scratch. Kuro, while in no truly life-threatening danger, had caused the poison to course rapidly through his body by moving too actively during the fight. The antidote he had seized from one of his opponents took some time to kick in, leaving him to lean on Oran’s shoulder for the time being.

As Oran repositioned Kuro, he clicked his tongue. “This is humiliating...”

“Woah—why do you sound so mad at *me*?” Oran said, as Kuro tightened his arm around Oran’s neck. “Don’t try to choke me!”

Herscherik was relieved to hear their usual banter. *Everyone’s all right... How long do we have until Mark shows up?* Herscherik checked his watch to see that there was still some time left until the royal guards, led by his brothers, were planned to arrive. *As soon as they’re here, we’ve got to save any evidence we can... There has to be something that ties this to the minister.* If it came to light that he was tied to a revolutionary (or more accurately, terrorist) faction of the Church, Herscherik saw no way for the minister to weasel out of it. If they were lucky, they might even be able to prosecute the minister for *all* of his wrongdoings after this.

“Hersch!” Oran shouted.

His thoughts interrupted, Herscherik looked up. There stood one of the clergymen who had been knocked out, now charging at Herscherik with a gleaming blade in his hand. The man was charging so fast that Herscherik couldn't believe he had been unconscious only a moment ago.

Oran dropped Kuro where he stood and sprinted forward. Kuro produced one of his concealed weapons, but he hesitated to throw it while his hand was still trembling from the poison. Herscherik stood between him and the clergyman, after all. Shiro too, could not use magic and struggled to even move. The clergyman had chosen his moment to strike when all of them had their guard down.

Herscherik recognized the man as the one who'd hit Jeanne earlier. He heard Oran rush at him from behind, but Herscherik could plainly see that the clergyman would reach him first.

Then, a flash of copper entered his field of vision. *What?*

"Out of the way!" The man's voice echoed, but Herscherik couldn't see him around the long copper hair that had come between him and his assailant. The sound of impact followed, and the waterfall of hair trembled. "Let go!" the man shouted, before another sound of impact. Then another.

Even still, the veil of copper remained. Herscherik saw Oran run straight past him and draw his sword. The clergyman groaned, but Herscherik had no interest in his fate. The copper hair faltered, then fell to the floor.

"Jeanne?" Herscherik called. She remained motionless. "Jeanne!" He rushed over, turning her onto her back. His stomach sank when he saw her clothes soaked with blood from her chest all the way down to her stomach.

"Let me see, Hersch!" Oran rushed over, and the sight of Jeanne's current state struck him speechless.

That made Herscherik fear the worst. "Jeanne will be all right, won't she, Oran?!" he shouted, putting his hands over one of her wounds to stem the tide. He recalled how on medical dramas, they always put pressure on the wound to stop the bleeding. No matter what he did, warm torrents of blood kept flowing, staining his hands crimson.

Kuro tore off a piece of a nearby clergyman's robe and threw it to Oran. Oran bandaged Jeanne's wounds with it, but the bleeding didn't stop. The red pool on the floor only grew larger. It was clear for all to see that Jeanne would not make it—except to Herscherik, who kept desperately pressing his tiny hands onto her wounds.

"Hersch..."

"Her bleeding won't stop, Kuro. How can I make it stop?!" Herscherik pleaded, because he didn't want Kuro to finish that sentence. No one could give him the answer he wanted...

Until a devilish whisper crawled into his ear. "*I* may be able to keep her alive." Hoenir had risen to his feet, leaning against the wall and looking at Herscherik with a gentle smile. "With my Healing magic...well, *even* with my Healing magic, I'd give her a fifty-fifty chance. And no one in this country wields more powerful Healing magic than I do. A mere physician would have no chance, even if she had time to find one."

"You planned this...?" Herscherik muttered.

Hoenir shook his head. "No. Now that Noel's transcendence has failed, your death would not benefit me. It seems *that man* had an allegiance higher than the Church after all. Not that I cared. That fact had no bearing on *my* plan."

There was only one other person the clergyman could have been talking about. "Barbosse...!" Herscherik muttered. Who else could it have been, all things considered?

"Now, Prince Herscherik. If you want to save the girl, you must accept my terms."

"What's your price?" Herscherik asked with a scowl, since he already knew the answer.

Hoenir grinned with satisfaction. "Your eternal fealty to me, Your Highness."

Herscherik shook his head at the expected term. If he agreed, Hoenir would never loosen his grip on him. There was no use lying to him, either. Herscherik knew that if he agreed, he would end up as the man's puppet after all.

Hoenir let out an amused laugh. “I thought you despised sacrifices, Your Highness. She sacrificed herself for you.”

“I...” Herscherik knew that. No matter how idealistic it seemed, he still didn’t want to lose anyone for the sake of his cause. But now, Jeanne had fallen to protect him, and her life was about to fade away.

“If you agree, you will save her life. What say you, Your Highness?”

Herscherik felt like his body weighed heavier by the second. He thought he heard Oran and Kuro, but their voices seemed so distant.

“Snap out of it!” Shiro shouted, and pain shot across Herscherik’s face. “Knight! Stop standing around like a fool and shut that man up!”

After a beat, Herscherik realized that Shiro had slapped him across his face. “Mister Shiro...?” He called, taken aback.

“A mind attack spell. A subtle one that doesn’t need a formula, but greatly effective against someone with no Magic. Especially in your current mental state.”

Herscherik looked over to see Oran drag Hoenir to the ground and put the tip of his sword against the archbishop’s neck.

“That’s my Noel.”

“Don’t call me that!” Shiro spat.

“But Jeanne’s going to...” Unable to make a decision, Herscherik watched Oran bind Hoenir with a rope Kuro had produced. He couldn’t accept Hoenir’s terms, but that meant a death sentence for Jeanne. *What should I do...?*

“Prince Herscherik...” A quiet voice reached him. A pair of trembling hands that were quickly losing their warmth held Herscherik’s, stained red from his desperate attempts to stop her bleeding through it all.

“Jeanne...” Herscherik held her hands in his and peered into her eyes.

Jeanne looked up at him and relief washed over her face.



“Please, do not be concerned for my sake... It’s time for me to reap what I’ve sown.” Jeanne recalled how she had destroyed so many lives, even murdering innocent people. She never expected to escape her past. She had committed far too many sins for that. *This is exactly what I deserve...*

“But—!” Herscherik tightened his grip on her hands. The coldness of them signified how little time she had left. “But...!” He couldn’t say the rest out loud. If he did, his resolve would crumble.

Jeanne placed a hand on Herscherik’s cheek, tilting his face up, and forced herself to smile. “You mustn’t lie to yourself.” Herscherik had once told her the same thing.

With a cough, blood trickled out of her mouth. Her life was slipping away with every second. Jeanne let go of Herscherik’s cheek and removed her earring. “Please, take this... Prince Herscherik.” She handed him her earring shaped like a cylinder coiled into a circle. The metal jewelry shared its color with Jeanne’s hair, and it was inscribed with detailed runes.

“Prince Herscherik, this will aid you in your...” Her voice grew weak. She no longer felt pain, as if her brain was refusing any signals of it. She began to feel cold, except her hand that Herscherik was still clutching tightly. The source of that warmth, however, had twisted his face up with the effort of holding back tears. “Don’t cry, Prince Herscherik...”

“I’m... not...” It’s true that Herscherik wasn’t crying, exactly but he felt like he was being slowly crushed. It would have been much easier for him if he could simply drown in his tears and show his emotions. But his heart seemed frozen, leaving him unable to express anything.

“I will always... be by your side...” Jeanne uttered the only wish she had ever dared to have for herself.

“Jeanne...” Herscherik’s grip tightened around her hands.

“I was so happy that you liked my song, Prince Herscherik...” Jeanne could feel her own life on the verge of flickering away. Her world began to dim, as if someone had begun to turn out the lights. “I love how your smile... is like a ray of sunshine...” The last thing Jeanne would see in this world was Herscherik’s

face. “Please take care... of Vivi...” Her hands let go of the prince’s, and the light of life flickered out of Jeanne’s eyes.

Having restrained Hoenir, Oran came back to close her eyelids. Now, she looked like she was only sleeping. Herscherik felt a once warm part of his heart freeze over—an emotion that had stayed within him since Jeanne confessed her feelings was now crumbling away into nothing. *No... That’s not all, Jeanne.*

It’s true that he could never swear loyalty to Hoenir, but his desire not to lose Jeanne was just as real. That’s how much she’d meant to him. *Ah, that’s right.* Herscherik realized something for the first time, *She was my... first...* Now that he had realized this, though, there was nothing he could do to bring her back.

With his left hand still holding Jeanne’s, Herscherik stretched out his right hand to stroke her polished, copper-like hair. He loved how silky it felt against his fingers. The first time he had touched her hair like this was when she had cried in his arms like a little child. He’d wanted to protect her. Herscherik still vividly remembered the first genuine smile she had ever shown him, just after crying so hard.

He would never see her smile again.

“Jeanne...” Herscherik called, one last time.

Herscherik remained where he was without saying a word, only tenderly stroking Jeanne’s hair until the royal guards charged in.

After watching her pass, the Eternal Witch dismissed the mirror floating in the air with the flick of a hand. As soon as she could confirm she was no longer being sabotaged, she had produced the mirror to watch the prince’s progress, but it was too late for her to do anything about the outcome.

Destiny can be boundlessly cruel... The witch had originally foreseen a few possibilities. One was a future where Herscherik was killed by Hoenir, Shiro became a Djinn, and the world was torn apart by war. Another was the Magic Circle growing out of control, taking out the cathedral and everyone in its vicinity. Those had been averted by Herscherik himself.

Then, destiny presented him with two paths. Herscherik could have been

killed, or Jeanne could have protected him with his life. The one who ultimately made the choice, however, had been Jeanne.

“She chose her destiny... For the boy she loved.” A moment’s hesitation would have resulted in Herscherik’s death. Jeanne had no reservations in choosing Herscherik’s life over her own. And so, Herscherik survived and Jeanne did not. “I better investigate that...” The Eternal Witch sighed.

Her utterance was heard by no one, and dissipated into the air as the Witch herself disappeared from view.

Chapter Twelve: The Funeral, the Voice, and the Engagement

The church bells tolled, announcing the departure of the deceased's soul. Dressed entirely in black, Herscherik and his men left the church after the service and stared up at the bell.

The melancholy breeze blew through Herscherik's light-golden hair, and the copper-colored earring peeked through the strands, glimmering in the sunlight. The dagger had left a vivid scar on his cheek. The Holy Church that worshiped the creator god was tasked with sending off the souls of the deceased and held funerals for anyone, regardless of their faith. Herscherik didn't know how to feel about the fact that the very Church that had killed Jeanne was seeing her soul off to the next world.

A week had passed since the incident at the Cathedral. The official story was that the extremist faction of the Holy Church had planned a coup, but had been thwarted by Herscherik and friends. Every member of the Church involved in the incident had been left to the judgment of the Church itself, since they were protected from the laws of individual nations. There were some within Gracis who opposed this decision, but they decided to respect the Church and their judgment. Since the Church forbade the execution of any member of its clergy, the expected sentence was life imprisonment.

Today, the funeral of a lady who had become a casualty of the attempted coup was held.

"How are you feeling today?" Kuro draped a black coat over Herscherik's shoulders. Spring was near, but the cold air still stung.

"I'm fine." Herscherik gave him a smile.

"You were out for a while. Don't push yourself," Oran said with concern.

Herscherik chuckled at his men, more overprotective than usual. "I haven't even had a fever for three days, now."

It was only natural for them to be concerned for Herscherik, who had been bedridden for three days after the incident—perhaps from taking in all of that Magic. After those days spent lazily in bed, though, he was now as healthy as he had been before. All of that Magic, as it turned out, had leaked out of him like air from an open balloon.

“Prince Herscherik,” a voice called from behind him. “Thank you for gracing us with your presence today.”

Herscherik turned around to find Volf Barbosse in a deep bow. He, too, was clad in black with a pained expression on his face, playing the role of the distraught father whose daughter had been tragically caught up in this terrible incident. Knowing that the whole thing was a façade, Herscherik only felt disgust.

However, he kept his emotions hidden as he answered with a pained expression of his own. “No words can express my regret for failing to protect your daughter.”

Barbosse shook his head. “Your Highness’ bravery protected our very nation. What more could I wish for, as a royal servant of the kingdom... Please forgive a grieving father for the time being.” Barbosse looked at the floor. Anyone unaware of the hidden subtleties of the situation would have been fooled by the performance.

A gust of wind passed between them.

“You won’t feed on this country for long, you decrepit fox,” Herscherik quietly spat out.

Barbosse’s shoulders twitched. “Pardon...?”

“I didn’t say anything,” Herscherik smiled innocently enough that Barbosse could not pursue the issue further. “I must be going. Please give my regards to my fiancée.” Herscherik turned on his heels, followed by his men of service. “I’ll tear that stupid mask right off his face,” Herscherik muttered, just loud enough for his men to hear. His smile had completely vanished.

Watching the prince leave, Barbosse snarled internally. *I was this close to*

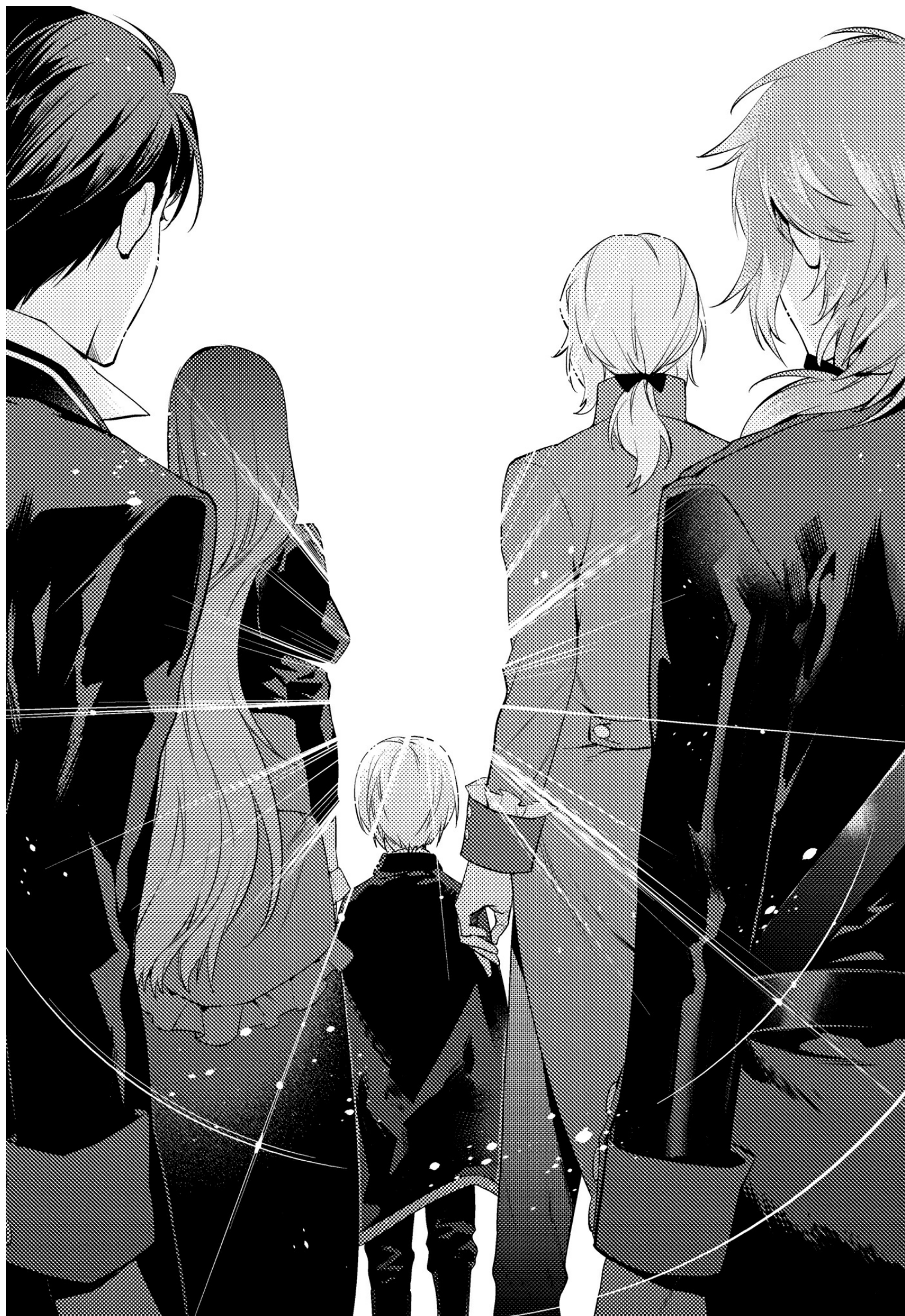
taking care of that prince... When he had first faced the prince when the boy was only three years old, Barbosse had the strange feeling that the prince was no toddler. After the drug trafficking incident, his faction had suffered—defectors who had disappeared without much of an explanation. There were also others who now simply refused to cooperate with him even though they remained in the capital. He had only discovered that the young prince had been the cause through a tip from the Church.

After investigation, he saw that very prince in the shadows of every incident that plagued him. That's why Barbosse had schemed to take the prince into the fold or get rid of him altogether. If Herscherik would not marry Violetta and become one of his pieces on the board, he had planned to simply eliminate him.

That girl was nothing but a burden until the end. Even Barbosse, who ruled the kingdom from the shadows, couldn't murder royalty with impunity. The best solution for him would have been to assassinate the prince during the recent chaos and blame it on the coup. However, the assassination attempt was foiled by Jeanne herself protecting the prince.

Even though the prince would formally be engaged to Violetta, Barbosse's concerns remained. He feared that the risk of letting the prince live might outweigh the risk of taking him out now. *And if he knows...* Barbosse quietly clicked his tongue at the little prince leaving with his men. The latest development had not turned out well for him in the slightest.

A gust of wind blew again, kicking up a patch of dust. Barbosse shielded his face from the forceful spring breeze. Then, he caught a glimpse of the prince between his fingers. The little boy had four figures in tow. While the black-haired butler and the knight with twilight hair were still there, a man of noble bearing with mustard-colored hair and a lady with hair like polished copper walked with them.



Barbousse rubbed his eyes and looked at the prince and his party once more, but saw only three figures.

The room was lit by nothing more than beams of sunlight, or perhaps moonlight, seeping through cracks in the stone walls. Hoenir was now imprisoned in this cell ruled by darkness, his arms restrained with magic-canceling bands and a spell with the same effect cast on the room.

“I never expected to actually fail...” Hoenir muttered, sitting flat on the ground. Having lost his title of archbishop, he could only laugh. But then, he stopped himself.

“But how *did* the boy stop the ritual?” The Ritual of Transcendence, once activated, would continue until its completion. If unsuccessful, it was programmed to overload instead, turning the entire vicinity to rubble—including all available evidence of his crimes. As soon as the caster was gone, everyone in the cathedral was supposed to die.

As it had turned out, however, there had been no Djinn and no explosion. *Did Noel control it somehow?* Hoenir wondered, but reconsidered. Not only did Noel not become a Djinn, but he also constructed a spell that destroyed the barrier and neutralized everyone in the room in an instant. Hoenir expected that spell would have drained Noel enough to prevent him from casting anything else.

Then, who could it have been? Leaving aside his precious puppet, there were two other people of note in the room, and Hoenir knew that the noble’s daughter was unskilled in magic. “Could it have been...?” The youngest prince, with his blond hair and emerald eyes, came immediately to mind. Noel had told him, however, that the prince lacked any Magic Within whatsoever. “I see, the prince... Ah-hah! That explains everything!”

A lack of Magic power didn’t guarantee that the prince was unskilled at the *casting* of magic.

Hoenir knew full well that the power to intake and convert Floating Magic as though it were their own was not exclusive to the doll he had so carefully manipulated. That power had once belonged to those who lived in the Ancient

Era—at least, that’s what Hoenir had been told. He now realized that the prince somehow held that very same ancient power, and it was a vessel large enough to withstand the abundance of Magic in that room, without the use of drugs.

Hoenir shook with ecstasy. The treasure he had so recently given up on was once again dangling before him.

Then, he jolted as if he was struck by lightning. He fell on all fours, screaming out, “Master! Oh, great master! Forgive me!” If anyone had witnessed such behavior, they would have concluded that the former archbishop had finally gone mad.

Hoenir looked up from the floor, bowing over and over again as he stared into empty space. “I have no words to excuse my miserable display of... After all the knowledge you had granted us...” Hoenir pleaded in apology. He listened to a voice no one else could hear for a moment before his expression brightened with bliss. “I do not deserve your kindness. I am overwhelmed by the honor you have bestowed upon me... But I have found a holy vessel for Your Magnificence! Not a counterfeit one, but a true Eucharist!”

Hoenir shook with joy, as if he had achieved salvation at this very moment. “Yes... Yes...” He listened, his expression euphoric, nodding over and over again. “I understand. Then, we shall wait... until the Eucharist is consecrated. Yes, Master... Saint Ferris.” Hoenir’s voice echoed in the ominous darkness.

Violetta checked her appearance in the full-length mirror prepared for her. Her light yellow dress, commissioned especially to match her fiancé’s hair, was dusted with countless gems, accompanied by a jade necklace and earrings that matched his eyes. They all glimmered in the light of the room with subtle excellence. Her hair and make-up were overseen by the best artists in the capital, completing her sublime look.

Herscherik’s seventh birthday party was to be hosted that day, where his engagement with Violetta would be made official. Violetta had not left the house since her sister’s funeral, where she had exchanged a few words with Herscherik. She had not seen him since.

She recalled how Herscherik had come to tell her of Jeanne’s death. “Stop

lying to me!” she had berated him. She wept in his arms, pounding her fist into his chest. Even though she noticed the wound on Herscherik’s cheek and understood how dangerous it had been for him, she couldn’t accept that fact she could never see Jeanne again, and had been determined to blame Herscherik for it. No matter how many cruel words Violetta said or how many times she struck the prince, neither he nor his men stopped her. In fact, Herscherik had held her until she settled down.

When Violetta’s crying subsided, Herscherik looked into her eyes and whispered, “I will protect you with my life.”

Those words would have sent Violetta to the moon, if it wasn’t for her sister’s death. But what struck Violetta more than those words was Herscherik’s expression when he said them. Herscherik wasn’t crying, but looked more sorrowful than she could imagine. His face had made Violetta’s chest tighten.

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting, Violetta.” The voice called her back to the present time. Herscherik, dressed more princely than usual, was smiling at her.

Violetta was relieved to see that the scar on Herscherik’s cheek had faded, and she gave him a ladylike curtsy—keeping her back straight just like Jeanne had taught her.

“Your dress is beautiful.”

Violetta smiled at the unusual compliment, different from his ordinary repertoire. It made her happy that he still seemed pleased to see her after she treated him so poorly. “Oh? Is that the only beautiful thing you see?”

“No, of course not!” Herscherik rushed to deny, and Violetta let out a laugh for the first time in a long while.

“Prince Hersch,” his butler called. “It’s time.”

Herscherik nodded, and held out his hand to escort Violetta to the ball. “Shall we, Princess?” he asked, and Violetta took his hand.

An elegant melody played, as a couple (too young to be described as lovers) danced in the center of the ballroom. One of the partners was the Seventh Prince Herscherik, who had just turned seven and had already prevented a coup

from within the Church with only himself and his two men. Both nobles and commoners alike were bewildered by the news, until an official statement of apology was issued by the Church and people began to see the similarities between Herscherik and the famous Prince of Light.

Furthermore, the girl who danced with him now only added to the credibility of the story. The girl was Violetta, daughter to Marquis Barbosse and his wife. Their engagement seemed to signify the importance the minister placed upon the Seventh Prince. A rumor that had once circulated—that the minister was pushing for the Seventh Prince to succeed the throne—had gained some traction again.

“Are you sure, Violetta...?” Herscherik asked, as they danced prior to the official announcement of their engagement.

Violetta twirled with a smile. “Yes, I’ve decided.”

“But—”

“I am an ignorant, foolish girl,” Violetta interrupted. “But, as ignorant as I am, I am not so shameless as to pretend I never learned anything.”

When she was going through her sister’s belongings along with the manor servants, Violetta had found a letter addressed to her from Jeanne, tucked into the stack of sheet music she had written. The letter contained details about Jeanne’s birth, their father’s sinister deeds, Jeanne’s confession of having taken part in them, as well as her feelings about Herscherik and her sister.

The letter had allowed Violetta to smile at Herscherik once again.

Herscherik closed his eyes. “You’re strong, Violetta. Jeanne was too...” Had Ryoko ever been as strong as either of them? Herscherik thought back to when Ryoko was in second grade, then to high school, when she had devoted herself to her hobbies. She had endured no real hardships and was self-centered. She had never thought that those days would ever end.

“No, Prince Herscherik,” Violetta continued, stepping to the music, “If I had never met you, I would have never learned to think for myself. I’m sure the same was true for my sister.”

“Do you think meeting me...” *Caused Jeanne’s death?* Herscherik didn’t dare

ask. He still vividly remembered how Jeanne's body had gradually lost its warmth. He simply hadn't been able to bring himself to leave her, even after his brothers arrived. Marx had been compelled to move Herscherik by force.

For three nights after coming to see Violetta, Herscherik had the same nightmare of Jeanne dying, only for him to wake up in the middle of the night running a fever; he had to remind himself what was real by touching Jeanne's earring.

"No, Prince Herscherik," Violetta calmly said. "My sister was happy to have met you. I'm happy, too." She sounded sincere. "Prince Herscherik, would you choose a life without freedom where you had everything you wanted, or a life earned with your own choices?"

"That's why you made your choice."

"That's right!" Violetta answered with a brimming smile as the song concluded.

Herscherik led Violetta towards the most revered individual in Gracis Kingdom. They smiled at Herscherik's siblings, all applauding them along the way. Once they came before the king, they each took a deep curtsy and bow.

Solye applauded their dance with a smile. "That was wonderful, you two."

"Thank you, Father," Herscherik answered.

Violetta maintained her posture in a curtsy, since lifting from a curtsy without the king's permission was against royal etiquette.

"Please lift your head, Lady Violetta."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Violetta looked up, and was shocked by her first close encounter with the king's beauty—his platinum hair that looked like solidified moonlight and the same calm eyes as Herscherik. More than anything, he looked too young to be forty years old, especially when he was dressed to the nines for the occasion. *He really is Prince Herscherik's father...*

"Violetta," a calm voice interrupted with a chuckle. "It's rude to stare at His Majesty, especially when His Highness is standing right next to you." Despite his joking tone, Volf Barbosse's comment seemed to increase the tension in the

ballroom. He bowed to the king and Herscherik. “An incredible honor to have His Highness Prince Herscherik engaged to my daughter, Violetta.”

“I’m very happy about it,” the king answered. “She seems like an intelligent young lady.”

Violetta tightened her grip on her dress. As she began to tremble from nervousness, she silently scolded herself.

“It’s all right, Violetta. I’m right here,” Herscherik whispered and smiled.

That stopped Violetta’s trembling. *I’m all right*, she told herself. *Prince Herscherik is here. And so is Jeanne...* “Forgive me for speaking out in Your Majesty’s presence,” Violetta started as she bowed her head.

A carriage waited at the back entrance to the castle after nightfall where there were otherwise no signs of life.

“Leave the rest to me, Your Highness,” answered the Marquis Roland Aldis, father to Oran and former ‘Blazing’ General of Gracis. In the carriage behind him waited Oran’s brothers, both knights, and his wife Anne stood beside him. A girl in simple clothes turned her back to the Aldis family and bowed. It was Violetta, daughter of the Marquis Barbosse, who had danced with Herscherik at his birthday ball earlier that night. Across from them stood Herscherik and his men.

“I’ll write to you, Violetta. I’ll wait for you.”

“Prince Herscherik. I’m Violetta Barbosse no longer. Just Vivi,” she proudly said.

“That’s right... Vivi.”

At the ball, Vivi had asked the king to break her engagement with Herscherik. This had taken the minister by surprise, and he had tried every tactic he could think of from gentle nudging to full-blown rage, but Vivi sternly refused to reconsider.

The non-royal party breaking a royal engagement was cause enough for the whole family to be punished for disrespecting the royal family, after all. When

Barbosse finally declared that she was no daughter of his and commanded her to leave the manor, Vivi answered “Gladly!” with a brilliant smile. Herscherik would long recall Barbosse’s dumbfounded expression whenever he needed a little chuckle.

The plan to break the engagement had been secretly concocted while Vivi was still mourning her sister. She had refused to go through with the engagement, which would leave her still at her father’s command and a burden to Herscherik. Breaking the engagement at the very occasion where they were meant to announce it was the most blatant way that Vivi could defy her father in this matter.

In order to do this, Vivi forsook her title as the daughter of a marquis and even the name Violetta. She would live in an orphanage run by the Aldis family. The orphanage, however, was more of a private boarding school, which would provide Vivi with a comfortable life and proper education while keeping her out of Barbosse’s reach. All arrangements had been made by letter, hand delivered by Kuro and Oran coming to the Barbosse manor, which Vivi had replied to by writing on the back of that same letter. Not even Barbosse could have foreseen that the couple to be engaged were preparing to break their engagement in public.

“I must confess, Prince Herscherik,” Vivi said with a serious expression, having dropped her smile. “A small part of me still resents you for not saving Jeanne” Herscherik held his breath. “But,” she continued, “I still resent Jeanne a little, too, for stealing away your smile for so long.” Herscherik looked up at her. “Please smile, Prince Herscherik. Jeanne and I love your smile. It’s like a warm ray of sunshine. You must brighten our nation with it.”

“Thank you, Vivi.” Herscherik smiled. Although it was still forced, he was beginning to regain his old smile.

Nothing could bring back lost lives. As fantastical as this world was, there were some things that were irreversible. Herscherik knew that he would lose someone again somewhere along the way. Still, he would never just give up and accept that there was nothing he could do about it. Even if the sorrow tore him apart, he would carry it all with him. Herscherik renewed his resolve that this was the only thing he could do.

“Prince Herscherik,” Vivi called, as Herscherik felt a warm sensation on his cheek, followed by the gentle sound of a kiss.

“Vivi!” Herscherik held his cheek. Once he understood what Vivi had done, he could feel his cheeks redden.

Vivi proudly smiled. “I’ll protect you, Prince Herscherik, when I see you again!” Vivi turned on her heel and climbed into the carriage.

Roland laughed at Herscherik left standing there, and his wife smiled along. Oran’s brothers took their seats in the front of the carriage, jesting “Oh, to be young again!” to each other. By the time Herscherik had snapped out of his paralysis, the carriage was already rolling away into the distance.

“Hersch?”

“Hello?”

His men of service peered into his face. Herscherik, his face visibly red, even in the dark, looked at his men to and fro. “I don’t think I’ll ever stand a chance against girls...” he muttered, despite having been a woman in his previous life.

His men joked, “You’re just realizing this *now*?” in return.

Later on, Violetta Barbosse would earn a scholarship to join the academy. She would prove to be an excellent student and later a talented and devoted government official working in the castle.

Finale: The Reincarnated Prince and the Haloed Sage

A spring breeze blew in through the open window, bringing the scent of flowers with it. The pure white, flowing hair of the figure sitting on the sofa near the window was gently brushed by the wind.

The man on the sofa, beautiful enough for anyone to mistake for a woman, smiled at the feeling of the breeze. If anyone had witnessed the smile, as beautiful as a goddess', they might have immediately knelt in prayer.

Spring... Shiro silently remarked, brushing his hair aside. When he moved his porcelain-like hands, the chains of his cuffs rattled.

After the incident at the Cathedral, Shiro was bedridden for three days much like Herscherik, but he had been confined in the castle instead of being sent to the Church. That being said, he was given three meals and all the books he wanted. A messenger of the Church had first demanded to prosecute Shiro alongside Hoenir, but Herscherik had put a stop to that.

"He's the *victim*. Why should he be punished?" he had asked. When the messenger tried to argue with him further, Herscherik gave a dauntless grin.

The wound on his cheek, it may be worth noting, was healed cleanly by the Healing magic of a Church bishop. If it had scarred over, Kuro might have gone to kill Hoenir for real.

Herscherik had presented the messenger with a piece of paper. It was a document appointing his Spellcaster of service, signed by the king. The name of the appointee was marked down as Weiss, dated for the beginning of the year.

"He's my Spellcaster of service," Herscherik had said. "He discovered Hoenir's evil plans and notified me of them." The document was forged, of course, but Herscherik powered through with confidence. "But the government can't step in without definitive proof. He had volunteered as a spy, despite the danger."

As the messenger still tried to fight him on it, Herscherik let out an exasperated sigh. "Is the Church, who only stepped in after receiving word from

Prince Eutel, really in a position to issue demands to our nation, or to me, who suffered the most from the actions of your members?” This shut the messenger up for a moment. When he opened his mouth again, Herscherik cut him off. “While he was adopted by Hoenir, he had not yet come of age and thus cannot have been an official member of the Church... If this is still an issue, we have half a mind to demand that the Church hand over Hoenir as well. What say you?”

Herscherik’s quiet, subtle coercion to relent was more effective than any argument from a seven-year-old had any right to be. The messenger was completely silenced.

Hoenir’s coup attempt had set a dangerous precedent for the Church—it could threaten its very existence and its relationship with the nations of the continent. The Church undoubtedly wanted to sweep all of this under the rug as quickly and quietly as possible. In fact, the apology issued by the Church was, in essence, claiming that Hoenir acted on his own and had nothing to do with the larger organization.

Gracis had initially expected to judge Hoenir by their laws and make an example out of him both domestically and internationally, especially after he had been intentionally circulating dangerous drugs in the capital. On the other hand, the Holy Church was the largest religious organization in the world. Naturally, a great many people within Gracis were members of this Church, which made the government want to avoid any conflict with the organization as a whole.

While that was the official stance of the kingdom, Herscherik, who didn’t have shred of faith in religion, was ready to take on any opportunity to fight the Church if they insisted on fighting—although he ultimately wanted to find the best outcome for his country. In fact, Herscherik’s father and brothers had entrusted negotiations with the Church to Herscherik himself.

At the end of the day, Shiro would remain in the castle as Herscherik’s Spellcaster of service.

After the Church’s messenger left, Herscherik explained to Shiro what had happened, and apologized for appointing him Spellcaster of service without his

consent—but that wasn't of much importance to Shiro.

In fact, his only question for Herscherik was, "What does 'Weiss' mean?"

"It means 'white,'" Herscherik answered, leaving Shiro to be astounded at how uncreative Herscherik was.

Shiro looked down at his shackles. They were treated with a magic-canceling spell. If he were to try and use a spell, it would absorb his Magic, preventing it from activating. That being said, Shiro imagined that the shackles would easily break if he really wanted to break them. While the Ritual of Transcendence had failed, the sheer amount of Magic Within he now possessed was testament to how he had become something not-quite-human.

That was not the only change he had undergone, either. More was brought to light by Sigel's report.

According to the document, while the Church's drugs strengthened the user physically, the user would die without continued use. Once someone stopped taking the drug, their muscles and immunity would drastically weaken, which led to them contracting fatal illnesses.

None of the withdrawal symptoms Eutel had discovered from his sample or documents seized from the cathedral were seen in Shiro, so Sigel had tested him. When he returned, Herscherik was treated to the rare sight of a confused Sigel.

"There is a chance that he has become a kind of immortal," Sigel said. A slew of technical terms followed, but Herscherik understood the gist to be that Shiro's body might have become un-aging.

I really am a monster, now... Shiro thought with a touch of self-deprecation, when Herscherik came to visit him, unaccompanied.

"How are you feeling, Shiro?" he asked. He had stopped addressing him as 'Mister Shiro' ever since Shiro told him, his ears slightly reddened, to "Drop the 'Mister.'" Herscherik spotted Shiro's cuffs and frowned. "Can't we take those off already?"

Shiro shook his head. "I prefer it this way. I am a monster, after all." Shiro had kept the shackles by choice. While he had them on, he felt like he would be

allowed to remain with humans... to remain by Herscherik's side.

"Hey. You'll always be Shiro to me," Herscherik said, as if he had read Shiro's mind. "You'll always be the one who taught me magic, who defended me in the field lab, who saved me from being attacked in the streets, and who protected me from being killed by Hoenir." Herscherik approached Shiro, holding his cuffed hands. "You're not a monster, Shiro." Herscherik smiled for a moment before returning to a serious expression. "But I will find a way to turn you back. Promise."

Shiro knew that Herscherik would not be able to keep his promise. The Magic Circle in the cathedral had vanished when the spell failed. He didn't even know what formulas had been used. There was simply not enough information to figure out how to revert the unprecedented evolution his body had gone through. Shiro wondered how long he would live... Maybe forever, like a Djinn. Logically, he knew Herscherik's words would never come to pass. Even so, the words felt warm in his heart.

"Herscherik..." Shiro said, only to be corrected by him to call the prince by his nickname. "Then, Hersch... Let me be with you until we figure out how to do that."

"Does that mean you'll really be my mage of service?" Herscherik had only appointed him in order to protect Shiro from the Church anywhere he may go in the country. That's why he had planned to find Shiro a safe place to live—even if it was in the countryside or Shiro's hometown. "It's a dangerous place to stay," Herscherik warned. He was wary of what Barbosse would do next. Even after scouring the Cathedral, they were unable to prove Barbosse's ties to Hoenir, but it was evident that he wanted to get rid of Herscherik. He would undoubtedly begin to undertake his next scheme in order to finish the job once and for all.

"Danger is nothing new to me," Shiro said. He understood that, once word got out of his possible immortality, the prospect would interest many people. There were stories of nations falling in the pursuit of that very thing.

But, even now that he had more Magic than others and had become immortal, Shiro was still unable to cast high-level magic without formulas like a

legendary Djinn. When it came to combat, the strength of a Spellcaster was their firepower, balanced only by the amount of time it took them to prepare a spell. If they were attacked before Shiro could cast anything, he couldn't even protect himself.

"I don't know who I am, Hersch," Shiro confessed. This had been an effect of the curse and Manipulation spells that Hoenir had inflicted upon him over the years. A spell had been cast to manipulate his memories, making bad memories worse and happy memories as distant as possible. Shiro understood now why he could barely recall his parents' faces. For the same reason, he was still unable to remember his true name. "But with you, I can still feel like myself, even if I can't recall my proper name."

"Okay..." Herscherik relented. He couldn't turn Shiro away after that. "But don't do anything dangerous. Got it?" he added. If his other men of service had been there, they would have pointed out that Herscherik was always the one jumping into danger himself.

In response, Shiro rose from the sofa and knelt before him.

"Shiro?" Herscherik tilted his head.

The young man ignored him, and instead bowed with a hand on his chest. "My Liege... My body is a sword that cuts through your enemies, a shield that protects you from harm, and a staff that guides your way."

Herscherik was surprised that Shiro knew the words to the pledge of loyalty, especially as he recalled how Shiro had shown such disdain for the royal family when they'd first met.

Shiro looked up and stared at Herscherik. "I don't care about the royal family," he said. "I don't even care about this country. Not in the slightest," he brazenly declared. Herscherik didn't know how to react, which made Shiro smile that enchanting smile that could make anyone, male or female, fall for him in a heartbeat. "But for you, My Liege, I'll destroy a nation. Or even save it, maybe."

Knowing that with his newfound immortality and power to absorb Floating Magic, Shiro could literally do just that, Herscherik stammered out an answer to his dangerous proposition. But then, he saw the amused look on Shiro's face and realized that he was being teased.

“Then I have a condition for you,” Herscherik grinned. He reached for Shiro’s wrists and unlocked the shackles. “Never wear these again.” He held them up, as if to prohibit Shiro ever referring to himself as a monster from here on out.

“All right...” Shiro agreed.

Just as Herscherik happily nodded, a warm spring breeze blew into the room, announcing the arrival of a gentle spring.

Herscherik Gracis turned seven that year. Historians later claimed that this was the year when Herscherik, the Seventh Prince of Gracis Kingdom, had really come into his own.

The wordless song that he began to hum during this time eventually spread to the entire world through the efforts of traveling bards. The tune was given lyrics by any who pleased to do so. It was a song for farmers in the field, for a mother with her nursing child, for one lover to sing to another... But not a single rendition of it was a sorrowful one.

The tune would come to be known as the Hymn of Hope, and it would be sung throughout history.

This was also the year when Herscherik’s three men of service, whom he had trusted over anyone else, had all finally come together. The Twilight Knight Orángo, the unrelenting sword that struck down all of his master’s enemies; the Shadow Fang Butler, the all-encompassing shield who defended his master and his schemes from all enemies; and Weiss the Haloed Mage, the supreme staff that guided his Magic-less liege. They were each irreplaceable characters in any of Herscherik’s heroic tales recorded in history.

Weiss’ moniker, the Haloed Mage, was given to him because his white hair shone like a full rainbow whenever he cast a spell using his abundant Magic. As to who gave him that name, most believed that it was Herscherik himself. Historians theorized that Herscherik had given him this name so that people would not fear Weiss and his uncanny powers.

Whatever the case, Weiss was eventually accepted by the people as the Haloed Mage. He ended up creating various new spells and magical items, greatly contributing to the development of magic in the era and helping many

in the process. As his master had planned, people eventually began to welcome the Haloed Mage; he was later dubbed the Haloed Sage for his accomplishments. Numerous documents note that the Haloed Sage always appeared young and vibrant, no matter his age.

After Herscherik's death, the Haloed Sage disappeared from history as if he had never existed. Since then, legends of a Djinn with rainbow hair began appearing in historical documents around the world. No one ever discovered proof that this strange Djinn was the Haloed Sage himself.

The Reincarnated Prince and the Haloed Sage — Fin

Extra: The Bard and the Hymn of Hope

A traveling bard by the name of Tohne spotted a girl in the fountain plaza as evening approached. She was a skinny lass of about ten, with hair the color of polished copper, and she sat on the edge of the fountain, staring into space. There were very few people around, and it would be dark soon. Even in the capital of the prosperous Gracis Kingdom, it wasn't entirely safe for a child to be out alone after dark.

Tohne thought of his younger sister back home and couldn't help but call to the girl. "What are you doing here, miss?"

The girl jumped. She looked at Tohne, then immediately glanced away. "I can't... be at home," she muttered.

"But it's getting dark. It's not safe out here—you have to go home." Tohne's suggestion was met by silence. After a moment, he relented. It wasn't unusual for a child to "run away" from home after fighting with their parents. "Then why don't you hang out with me?" he offered, planning to walk her home once she had changed her mind.

The girl gave him a dirty look. "I'm not supposed to follow strangers... Especially not old men."

"Old?! I'm still in my twenties!" Tohne sighed, rubbing his chin. "I guess I really do look old." He tried to remain well-groomed for his job, but he was often thought to be much older than he was because of his well-defined, mature features. It had worked both for and against him before. "My name is Tohne. I'm a traveling bard. Can you tell me your name, little girl?"

"Jeanne..."

"What a pretty name." Tohne flashed a smile as to not scare the girl.

Tohne brought the girl to a pub he frequented near the red-light district, where people had begun to pour in after their work was done. All of the tables were full, so they had a seat at the bar. After ordering a glass of juice and some

soup, Jeanne hesitated at first but soon chowed it down, showing how hungry she had been.

Tohne watched the girl beside him as he sipped on his tea. *She's not very expressive*, he thought. *What a shame*. While the girl seemed a bit too skinny, her face had attractive features. He imagined that, with good food, sleep, and clothes, she would look like a whole different person.

The owner of the bar came to him, saying, "What's this, Tohne? You had enough of *grown-up* women?"

Tohne spat out his tea. Jeanne was looking to and fro between Tohne and the owner. "No!" Tohne denied. "That isn't what this is about!"

"Oh yeah? Weren't you crying that this gal you've been buying stuff for ended up with some other guy?"

"L-Leave the past in the past..." It was a fresh, painful memory for Tohne—a girl he had been showering in gifts had asked for his advice on wooing another man. The pain had subsided a bit after he'd drowned it in ale and music... Not that the fresh wound had completely healed yet.

"All right, my bad," the owner said, without sincerity. "Oh, can I bug you for a song? The guy I had booked never showed up... Just one?"

Tohne reached for his violin. He normally had scheduled gigs at several bars, small theaters, and plazas depending on the day, but it wasn't uncommon to see a few last-minute requests, either. No matter how small the gig, Tohne knew that word of mouth would ultimately lead to more work.

"Stay here for a minute," Tohne said to Jeanne, and walked onto the small stage. He waved to the already drunk and cheering crowd and launched into an upbeat song. The engaged crowd kept him going for five songs in all, until Tohne finally managed to bow his way off the stage amidst raucous applause.

When he returned to the bar, he was greeted by Jeanne's glimmering eyes. "Did you like my performance?" Tohne proudly asked, now that he had seen an age-appropriate expression on Jeanne for the first time.

"That was amazing!" she said in excitement. "It sounded so pretty! Can you play anything else?"

“Of course. This is how I put food on my table. I can play all kinds of songs on the violin, or the piano, or the guitar. Anything you like! You interested, Jeanne?”

After staring at the bard in admiration, Jeanne nodded. After that, Jeanne listened to Tohne talk about what songs or stories were popular lately, as well as his explanations about instruments.

After an hour or so, Tohne told Jeanne to wait at her chair while he went to the owner of the pub for his pay.

“Here it is, Tohne.” The owner tried to hand over five silver coins, but Tohne only took three, since he was only hired to do one song. He had played five of his own volition. Tohne explained this to the owner, and they settled on the owner covering his tab for the night in addition.

“So, you know who that girl is, right?”

“You mean Jeanne?” Tohne shook his head.

“You don’t know?” the owner said, incredulous. “Not that I’m aware of all the details... But her mother works in the red-light district. Used to work in a noble’s manor, from what I’ve heard. Apparently she was of decent birth. Then the noble got his hands on her and she had the kid. Chased out of the noble’s place *and* cut off from her parents.” The owner explained that he knew as much because his wife had helped Jeanne’s mother while she was still pregnant. The single mother with copper hair and good looks was the talk of the town for a while. “That poor woman. And that poor girl. Just another life ruined by a rich bastard.”

Tohne then asked for the girl’s address and left the bar.

He led Jeanne through the red-light district by the hand, which Tohne imagined was met by inquisitive stares that silently accused him of unspeakable deeds, but he gritted his teeth through it all.

They eventually arrived at a rundown house, and Tohne knocked on the door. After a cough or two from within, the door opened to a woman with the same color hair as Jeanne. Tohne guessed the woman to be Jeanne’s mother. Just as the bar owner had said, he found her on the thin side, but beautiful. The

mother gave Tohne an inquisitive look before spotting her daughter hiding beside him.

“Jeanne! Where did you wander off to, staying out this late?!” she angrily demanded.

“M-Mom...” Jeanne’s shoulders shook, and she let go of Tohne’s hand. “I-I’m sorry...”

“How many times do I have to tell you not to make me worry—” The mother’s scolding was crushed into a fit of coughing.

Jeanne ran to her. “Mom, are you okay?!”

“Shut up...! Get inside already!” She pulled Jeanne into the house and shooed her away. Jeanne looked back for a moment before retreating into the house, leaving the mother and Tohne to stand awkwardly at the door. “I’m sorry you had to see that,” the mother said, breaking the silence.

“No, it’s my fault for keeping her out this late... Oh, not that I was doing anything—” Tohne rushed to explain.

The mother chuckled at this, graciously smoothing over the misstep. Then, a shadow crossed over her face. “I’ve been ill, and told her not to come near me. Apparently, she took that to mean she couldn’t be in the *house*...” she woefully explained.

Tohne wondered if the mother, a prostitute, was just playing a part to garner sympathy. However, if that were the case, she likely would have played it from the moment she opened the door. If her health prevented her from going out to look for her daughter, Tohne could imagine how the mother could have been driven mad with worry. And if what the bar owner had said was true, they had a complicated history. He doubted that their relationship was solid. Recalling how Jeanne ate her soup and how both of them looked, Tohne could imagine how much they were struggling.

“My name is Tohne. I’m a traveling bard, and I may not look it, but I’m only in my twenties.” Tohne’s sudden introduction was met by a curious look from the mother. “If you don’t mind, can Jeanne accompany me while I’m in the capital? I could sure use an extra pair of hands to take care of the extra work that comes

with the job. I'll pay, of course. Oh—and I'm not into little girls or anything! Don't worry about that! I'll walk her home every day too!" Tohne had rattled on without giving the mother a chance to even ask a question.

The next day, Tohne went out into town with Jeanne in tow. He asked her to collect coins thrown to him while he played in the plaza and run messages to the bars and theaters where he was scheduled to play. At night, they ate at cheap bars and diners before Tohne walked Jeanne home with a meal for her mother and a bit of pocket money.

Even for a humble bard, this wasn't too much of an expense for Tohne. Every time he walked Jeanne home, the mother would watch Jeanne retreat into the house before thanking Tohne over and over. She always thanked him for looking after Jeanne, too, which had led to Tohne hoping that Jeanne's relationship with her mother would improve.

"You can't *not* butt your nose in things, can you?" the bar owner had said to Tohne.

A few days later, after a gig at a small theater, he noticed Jeanne looking at him like she wanted to ask a question. "Uncle Tohne..."

"Don't call me that."

"Can I play music, too?"

"Of course. You're interested?" he asked. Jeanne nodded after a beat. "I'll teach you, then."

Jeanne smiled for the first time since he had met her.

A month had passed since he first met Jeanne. After seeing that her mother had recovered and gone back to work and their normal lives had returned, Tohne decided to finally leave. He was a *traveling* bard, after all—a musician in search of new songs as he traveled from city to city and country to country. On occasion, he stayed longer than usual in a capital or other large city, but never for good. Besides, he had to keep learning new songs to keep the audience engaged. He had already told the bars and theaters as much, and even Jeanne's mother the previous day.

Today, before leaving, he finally came to tell Jeanne. He had waited so long because, truth be told, he didn't *want* to leave Jeanne.

"Mister Tohne... When will you be back?"

Tohne thought about that. After touring several nations, it would at least be a few years. Nowadays, there was always the chance of dying somewhere along the road, too. "I'm not sure... Oh, don't cry! Don't cry!" Tohne hurriedly said, then proposed, "Let's make a deal. I want you to write a song before I see you again. Something that will warm people's hearts."

"Warm... their hearts? What kind of song is that?" Jeanne blinked a few times, trying to process the figure of speech.

Tohne saw musical talent in her. In writing songs and lyrics, in particular. After teaching her how to read and write music as well as play a few instruments over the past month, she had created a few compositions of her own that were still too unrefined to call songs, but promising nonetheless.

"That's something that you have to figure out," Tohne answered. "Once you do, I'll sing it all over the world. Then we'll always be together through that song."

"Okay...!" Jeanne said with a smile.

As Jeanne saw him off, Tohne left the capital. It was the last time they ever met.

Tohne placed a bouquet of flowers on a tombstone within a cemetery on the grounds of a certain church. The tombstone read "Jeanne Barbosse."

"We promised..." Tohne muttered, touching the top of the tombstone.

Three years after they parted, Tohne had returned to the capital—to Jeanne's home. However, the house was occupied by someone else, and he was told that the previous tenant had died. He returned to the pub to hear that Jeanne's mother had passed half a year or so after he left the capital, and that Jeanne had been taken in by her father, the noble. While he regretted not staying in the capital longer, he was relieved to hear that she was living in an aristocratic household, not starving. That time, he remained in the capital for a month.

When he returned again in the spring three years later, he discovered that a marquis' daughter had been killed. When he asked for a name, he discovered that it was the same girl with the copper hair.

Tohne painfully regretted parting ways with her six years ago. Then, he heard footsteps on grass and turned around to find a noble child with golden hair and green eyes, accompanied by a young man who must have been his bodyguard, judging from the sword on his belt. The boy held a bouquet of flowers in his hand.

"You are...?" the child asked, and Tohne told him everything. How he was a traveling bard, how he was an old friend of Jeanne's, and about the promise he made to her. He didn't know why. Perhaps he wanted to share those memories with someone who knew her.

"Jeanne's song..." The boy closed his eyes for a moment before asking, "Mister Tohne, can I be the one to fulfill that promise?"

The bard was playing his last song of the night in a bar by the red-light district. It was a heartwarming song that reminded people of a warm spring day. While the rest of his repertoire was usually met with cheers, jeers, or whistles, everyone in the bar quietly listened through the song and applauded when it concluded. Tohne politely declined an encore and walked off the stage.

"Hey, Tohne. Was that a new song? Where's it from?" the owner of the bar asked.

Tohne only vaguely nodded with a smile.

He had finished the tune that the blond-haired boy had taught him. The boy had said that Jeanne was the one who had written the tune. In the end, Tohne had a good guess as to who the boy was. He knew Jeanne, the Marquis' daughter, had possessed extraordinary beauty. Combined with the stories of the Prince of Light he had heard in his travels, as well as the news of who had solved the incident at the Cathedral...

But Tohne decided that he didn't need to know who the boy *really* was.

"It's a good song," the owner said. "No lyrics? Or a title?"

“There are no lyrics... But, let’s see...” Tohne pondered for some time. “How about the Hymn of Hope?”

The lyric-less Hymn of Hope went on to spread throughout the world, without anyone knowing who wrote it to begin with. It has been noted in history that the famous hero Herscherik would often hum the Hymn of Hope to himself.

The Bard and the Hymn of Hope — Fin

Postscript

Nobiru Kusunoki here, currently too cold to leave my *kotatsu*. Thank you so much for reading Herscherik Vol.3 — the Reincarnated Prince and the Haloed Sage. Like the previous volume I won't include any spoilers here.

Thanks to all of you, the Herscherik series has reached its third volume. This one was the longest volume yet, which made for a difficult editing process. In addition to any grammatical errors and typos, I had to readjust the description of magic in this world, catch any contradictions... (yadda yadda).

That being said, I'm very happy with how the story turned out. I also received a subtle compliment from my editor, who gave me over 40 possible places to include illustrations. I thought the excitement would give me a heart attack, although I feel that way every time a Herscherik volume is published...

Thank to everyone who read the Reincarnated Prince and the Haloed Sage, everyone who's followed me from the online version, Futabasha, my editor M, Arico who always draws such beautiful illustrations, my designer, my proofreader (I'm sorry), everyone involved in the publishing process, and to my family who continues to feed me.

Thanks to all of you, we've gotten Volume 3 out. I'm looking forward to seeing you in the next volume. Rambling over. Signing off.

— Nobiru Kusunoki



The Reincarnated Prince and the Haloed Sage

The Epic Tale of the Reincarnated Prince Herscherik
NOBIRU KUSUNOKI

Illustrator **ARICO**



*Please make
yourselves at home.
Formality isn't my cup of tea.
Sorry to have surprised you.*

Herscherik
(Ryoko Hayakawa)
Seventh Prince of
Gracis Kingdom
35 y/o Otaku (F) in previous life

Jeanne
Barbosse's
Older Daughter

Violetta
Barbosse's
Younger Daughter

Hoenir
Archbishop
of the Holy Church

*That's why I'm
building my ultimate weapon.
I hereby commence the ritual...
to create a god!*

Ahhhhhhhhh!

Shiro
A Mage raised by Hoenir
Named 'Shiro' by Herscherik





*I don't care about royalty,
or the fate of any nation.
I have no interest in them.*

*But for you,
My Liege, I wouldn't
mind destroying,
or saving, a nation
or two.*



*We're pressing on,
Knight Delinquent.*

Schwarz (Kuro)

Herscherik's Butler of Service

Octavian (Oran)

Herscherik's Knight of Service

*I'll catch up
as soon as I'm
done here.*













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